Survey of Native American Literature

Josh Dickinson, SUNY Jefferson
Lumen Learning & Ivy Tech Community College
About This Book

This text is collected from several copyright-cleared resources and its readings serve as the basis for my ENG 245: Survey Native America Literature course at Jefferson Community College. I have taught this course since 2001 in both online and traditional formats. See the List of Changes for more specific information on the readings. I also use required print copies of Fools Crow, by James Welch, and How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems (1975-2002).

To create the course, I adopted Lumen Learning’s Introduction to Literature course shell, which operates with a CC-BY license and was provided by Ivy Tech Community College. Most of the texts are available through web or PDF links. The basic Introduction to Literature material is mostly hidden from student views, but is kept in case instructors wish to use it. Hidden content may appear in student views of the Table of Contents, so students should be notified of this fact. (MLA title formatting could not be adhered to for subject bars, as the software does not allow for use of quotations.)

While the course is organized by genre, parts could easily be rearranged thematically.

The original version of this book was released under a CC-BY license and is copyright by Lumen Learning. The changes to this book listed are released under a CC-BY-SA license and are copyright by Joshua Dickinson of Jefferson Community College in Watertown, NY. I am available at jdickinson@sunyjefferson.edu and (315) 786-2221 should you have any questions.

I also adapted a Writer’s Handbook resource for the College that goes into far more depth in coverage of the writing process and MLA style. This resource should be available on the SUNY list of OER textbooks and—especially in the free electronic formats—pairs well with the literature text. It is also available at: https://sunyjefferson.libguides.com/JCCOERtextbooks

List of Changes

- Renamed the modules as chapters.
- Deleted the “Course Contents at a Glance” part.
- In Chapter 2: Literary Conventions, I reordered items, adding my lectures “Self-Diagnosis of One’s Writing Ailments can be Fun!”, “Proper Source Use in Paragraphs,” “Using Sources: Blending Source Material with Your Own Work,” “Use Signal Phrases in Posts, Essays, and Tests,” and “Irony.”
- In Chapter 3: Writing About Literature, added several pages: “Annotation: Why Mark Up Your
In Chapter 4: Literary Analysis, added my lectures “Analysis is the Breaking Down of a Whole into its Parts,” and “With Analysis, Focus Upon Functions or Effects.”

- Added Chapter 5: Creation Myths
- For space’s sake, I relocated some poetry lecture material from Chs. 1-2 to Chapter 7: Poetry. I added my lecture content and reordered items. My pages include “Poems by Wendy Rose,” “Wendy Rose: ‘Just What’s All This Fuss About Whiteshamanism, Anyway’?”, and “Stress.”

Chapter 8: Nonfiction Readings

- and Responses features deletion of all Western content except Thoreau and Twain. I added the following pages: “Standing Bear: Land of the Spotted Eagle,” “Momaday and His Invitation,” “Leslie Marmon Silko: ‘Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective’,,” and “N. Scott Momaday: ‘The Way to Rainy Mountain’.”

- Added About the Author section to End Matter.

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Course Contents

About This Course
I have adapted this course from the Lumen shell for Introduction to Literature, originally developed by faculty at Ivy Tech Community College, using original materials, as well as materials from NDLA.

This text is intended for use in the Jefferson Community College (SUNY) ENG 245: Survey of Native American Literature class. Here is that course’s description from the College Catalog at Jefferson:

This course will cover a range of Native American writings, from oral “tribal” stories and poems in translation, to autobiographical narratives and contemporary fiction and poetry. Students will be exposed to a range of writings representing diverse Native American communities and will study both oral narratives transformed to writing and texts originally presented in written form. The course will not focus on any one Native American community in depth, yet will allow this opportunity to students through paper assignments. The course will also demonstrate how an understanding of specific cultural and historical contexts informs each selected task.

About Lumen

Lumen Learning’s mission is to make great learning opportunities available to all students, regardless of socioeconomic background.

We do this by using open educational resources (OER) to create well-designed and low-cost course materials that replace expensive textbooks. Because learning is about more than affordability and access, we also apply learning science insights and efficacy research to develop learning activities that are engineered to improve subject mastery, course completion and retention.

If you’d like to connect with us to learn more about adopting this course, please Contact Us.

You can also make an appointment for OER Office Hours to connect virtually with a live Lumen expert about any question you may have.

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Faculty Resources

Request Access

To preserve academic integrity and prevent students from gaining unauthorized access to faculty resources, we verify each request manually.

Click here to fill out the request form, and we will get you on your way.

Overview of Faculty Resources

This course comes with a collection of OER faculty resources. Since they are openly licensed, you may use them as is or adapt them to your needs.

Now Available

- Note to Instructors PDF
- In-Class Writing Activities Assignments

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Note to Instructors

Greetings Instructors,

Welcome to the Open Educational Resources (OER) collection for Introduction to Literature.

This collection is not a “course.” It is a collection of materials designed to assist instructors in teaching and presenting the concepts of Introduction to Literature. Instructors are urged to pick and choose the items that will add to their lesson plans; then instructors can make these items available to students through the LMS, in-class presentations, or even as hand-outs. The material can be used in conjunction with other items instructors find or prepare, or the material can be used as a sole source for the class.

This collection is designed to be helpful for programs or regions that choose not to require students to purchase an actual textbook. Literature anthologies are usually large, cumbersome, and expensive—and most of the literature in the bought anthology cannot be covered in a one semester class. This collection is low cost and easy to access.

The information is divided into 2 major categories:

1. Information and activities that give students background and terminologies for studying literature
2. A collection of literature including fiction, creative nonfiction, poetry, and drama

While the information provided is complete and ready to use for an Introduction to Literature course, it is NOT considered all-inclusive. Instructors can use these Creative Commons licensed items any way they see fit. However, instructors can also supplement with their own lessons and ideas.

This collection is also a continual work in progress. We are able to add to this collection easily, keeping it timely, fresh and ever-improving. We are open to new items and ideas.

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- How to Use This Collection. Authored by: Tom Chester. Provided by: Ivy Tech Community College. License: CC BY: Attribution
PDF versions of the primary textbook are available for offline use. While these versions are a convenient alternative for times when students lack Internet access, they do not include interactive content such as simulations, videos, and quizzes. For that reason, the offline versions should be used as a backup rather than as the primary textbook.

You can download the PDF using the following links: PDF

- (6.2 MB)

To share these files with your students, copy and paste the text and download link above into a page or announcement in your learning management system (Blackboard, Canvas, etc.).

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I Need Help

Need more information about this course? Have questions about faculty resources? Can’t find what you’re looking for? Experiencing technical difficulties?

We’re here to help! Take advantage of the following Lumen customer-support resources: Check out

- one of Lumen’s Faculty User Guides [here].
- Submit a support ticket [here] and tell us what you need.
- Talk and screen-share with a live human during Lumen’s OER office hours. See available times [here].

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- Help. **Authored by**: Michael Finney. **Provided by**: Noun Project. **Located at**: [https://thenounproject.com/term/help/1112130/]. **License**: [CC BY: Attribution]
Chapter 1: Experiencing Native Literatures Through Western Lenses

Defining Literature: What Does it Do?

Defining literature is always difficult. There are several overlapping definitions. Some concentrate of where the words are—our discussion is when it questions whether something can be literature if it’s oral. This gets at only part of the question. Other definitions get at what literature feels like to the audience/reader. Other definitions focus on the differences between literature and everyday use of language. By using a combination of approaches (being flexible) we can arrive at a definition.

I’m including a long quote from Jonathan Culler’s wonderful little book Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction. Culler teaches at Cornell. If any of you are serious about English as a major, you should probably read this book. The reason I mention this is that Culler makes literary theory understandable and he cuts through a lot of the current trends in criticism—that’s saying a lot, if you’ve seen some of the strange things to come out of our field of study lately. I wish I had read a book like this before tackling those English classes! Anyway, I’m not going to say much else about this—he goes from pages 18-41 trying to define this strange thing we call literature.

See what you can say about Culler’s take on defining literature. You could respond to it for some discussion postings.

Remember that epic poems like The Odyssey and The Iliad were initially oral—they were written down only much later. They are in our canon. The origins of poetry are oral rather than written.

Note that Culler’s book is published by Oxford UP, so it’s going to have single quotes where there should be double—and other British usages like single – instead of the– for quick shifts in thought. You should continue using Standard American English and MLA format.

The Definition of Literature

What sort of question?

We find ourselves back at the key question, “What is literature?” which will not go away. But what sort of question is it? If a 5-year-old is asking, it is easy. ‘Literature’, you answer, ‘is stories, poems, and plays.’ But if the questioner is a literary theorist, it’s harder to know how to take the query. It might be a question about the general nature of this object, literature, which both of you already know well. What sort of object or activity is it? What does it do? What purposes does it serve? Thus understood, ‘What is literature?’ asks not for a definition but for an analysis, even an argument about why one might concern oneself with literature at all.

But “What is literature?” might also be a question about distinguishing characteristics of the works known as literature: what distinguishes them from non-literary works? What differentiates literature from other human activities or pastimes? Now people might ask this question because they were wondering how to decide which books are literature and which are not, but it is more likely that they already have an idea what counts as literature and want to know something else: are there any essential, distinguishing features that literary works share?
This is a difficult question. Theorists have wrestled with it, but without notable success. The reasons are not far to seek: works of literature come in all shapes and sizes and most of them seem to have more in common with works that aren’t usually called literature than they do with some other works recognized as literature. Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, for instance, more closely resembles an autobiography than it does a sonnet, and a poem by Robert Burns – ‘My love is like a red, red rose’ - resembles a folk-song more than it does Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Are there qualities shared by poems, plays, and novels that distinguish them from, say, songs, transcriptions of conversations, and autobiographies?

**Historical Variations**

Even a bit of historical perspective makes this question more complex. For twenty-five centuries, people have written works that we call literature today, but the modern sense of literature is scarcely two centuries old. Prior to 1800 literature and analogous terms in other European languages meant writings’ or “book knowledge.” Even today, a scientist who says ‘the literature on evolution is immense’ means not that many poems and novels treat the topic but that much has been written about it. And works that today are studied as literature in English or Latin classes in schools and universities were once treated not as a special kind of writing but as fine examples of the use of language and rhetoric. They were instances of a larger category of exemplary practices of writing and thinking, which included speeches, sermons, history, and philosophy. Students were not asked to interpret them, as we now interpret literary works, seeking to explain what they are ‘really about’. On the contrary, students memorized them, studied their grammar, identified their rhetorical figures and their structures or procedures of argument. A work such as Virgil’s Aeneid, which today is studied as literature, was treated very differently in schools prior to 1850.

The modern Western sense of literature as imaginative writing can be traced to the German Romantic theorists of the late eighteenth century and, if we want a particular source, to a book published in 1800 by a French Baroness, Madame de Staël’s On Literature Considered in its Relations with Social Institutions. But even if we restrict ourselves to the last two centuries, the category of literature becomes slippery: Would works which today count as literature—say poems that seem snippets of ordinary conversation, without rhyme or discernible metre - have qualified as literature for Madame de Staël? And once we begin to think about non-European cultures, the question of what counts as literature becomes increasingly difficult. It is tempting to give it up and conclude that literature is whatever a given society treats as literature—a set of texts that arbiters [tastemakers, critics] recognize as belonging to literature.

**I hope this helps!**

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Read:ing NA Lit Critically: A Specialized Task

Acrylic painting: Reproduction of Inuit Mask (Josh Dickinson)

You may be Asking Yourself . . .
Remember that the essays by Native American writers which you read here do not necessarily follow as linear a format as the writings of non-Natives. That is, sometimes they only make sense when you get to the end. The job isn’t over then, though. Unlike watching TV, reading allows you to go back. If you marked up your book, then going back is even more valuable. Look at the text’s overall structure as you read—but wait really to look at how the essay is put together once you have read it all. Each of these suggestions is a way that dynamic readers make sense of the text. Few good readers do only one of these.

Ask Questions of the Text
Ask meaningful questions of the text. Here are some:

How does this example function in the essay/story/poem? Is she leading me back to her earlier point for a good reason?

What moods are being expressed in the piece, and why?

Is this reading highly symbolic, abstract? If not, is this text naturalistic, giving a sense of everyday
reality? Why might this symbolism/naturalism binary from Western literature not work when reading Native literature?

What is the author’s working definition of time, and why might that matter?

As you go on, you should get better at asking questions. You will see which lines of questioning are likely to yield interesting results. (Notice I didn’t say answers. Some of the best questions have no exact answer.)

Did you know that good writers often anticipate the questions you ask of the text. They often set up your questions so that they can answer them. Still, if you aren’t developing questions, you aren’t doing enough as a critical reader and experiencer of the text.

Look Up/Use Other Sources
Too often readers let things slip by them. Go with the idea that there are no synonyms, and that the author picked that particular word because only that word could say what she wanted.
Look up terms that you don’t know—or at least mark them.
Mark up your readings. . . copiously! We already talked about this, and I hope you do this on your terms.
Make connections between the earlier modules and the later ones.
Critical essays can be very helpful in situating difficult stories, plays, poems, and essays. Bounce your ideas off the essays, then.

Ideas for Organizing Your Understanding—Try Them!
These essays are culturally strong, stating beliefs and ways you probably don’t share. So, make a list of ideas that you see there. (Ever hear of a manifesto, a declaration of beliefs? These are manifestoes!) Taking the strong ideas out of context and putting them into notes will help.

Reread any of the works in this module. You will see that it rewards you. Often, a later reading of a different work will even underscore some aspects of something you read previously.
Six Tips for Being a Better Literature Student

Literature courses can be handled inappropriately and there is often not enough time to figure that out in a fifteen-week session. I have a few tips that should help us avoid recurring errors. Each of these tips relates to critical thinking and writing:

1. The audience knows the play, poem, or story. Summaries that just fill space are useless, so avoid writing a review or a running account of the plot. It would be like telling someone the directions to their own home when you were supposed to be arguing about the best spots along the way.

2. Apply the literary terms such as verbal irony, symbolism, theme, and metaphor. Do more than just point them out. Yes, they exist. (Skeptical readers like the ones you’ll have in the course would just say “Okay. . . so what?”) What is a metaphor doing in a given paragraph or stanza, though? You can always argue about functions or effects.

3. Everything we do is thesis-driven, meaning that it’s argument. A thesis is not just a statement of what you’ll do. It’s an arguable, provable claim that should have some substance. It’s not a question. It’s not a fact. It is an opinion—though you need not use I.

4. Anticipate what the audience thinks about a piece of literature. It’s important to realize that you’re writing in a public way about works which may have been valued and argued over for hundreds of years. Value that and take yourself seriously as a critic.

5. Plagiarism is easy to catch and will be dealt with harshly. If you are in doubt, cite the material. Remember that MLA is exacting, so be sure you’re using the correct style models. There is not much time to get used to this, so look at the Unit 1 mini-lectures and links on citing. The expectation is that you can look at a model and “get it right” in your writing. Ask questions and pay attention to the style, since how something looks is often as important as what it says.

6. Lastly, really work to avoid lateness. Be on the correct side of any due dates, as it’s really tough to make up work.

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Jane Tompkins: Indians: Texuality, Morality, and the Problems of History

In a course of this level, we will deal with scholarly articles such as Tompkins’s. Read the following essay by Jane Tompkins and apply its ideas to the short stories in this unit.

The essay by noted reader response critic Jane Tompkins is entitled “‘Indians’: Textuality, Morality, and the Problem of History.” Read it early in the unit. It may help to print the essay and annotate it. Use the difficult and interesting passages you found as material for discussion postings.

www.umsl.edu/~alexanderjm/IndiansbyTompkins.pdf

If you have trouble accessing the Tompkins essay, here’s its URL: http://www.public.asu.edu/~jvanasu/Indians.html

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Experiencing Literature

Terms and Concepts

Students of literature read and notice things. They also need a working vocabulary of literary terms. Luckily (for me), you already know a few dozen literary terms. I’ll expect you to use these. In addition, I want to introduce you to a few less-familiar topics (e.g., subversion, irony, and stereotyping). You can find out about these terms—and more—in the following lectures.

As we go on, you will become more familiar with how different authors use irony, subversion, etc., in order to achieve certain effects.

Paradox

No, it’s not a pair of ducks! Paradox is a seeming contradiction. It is an intricate device which gets readers to think. Paradox is often linked with irony.

Native American authors often deal with the paradoxes of white treatment of Indians. There is a lot of history there. What I want you to do is to notice when paradoxes appear, and alert us to them. We can interpret them after the class notices them. Check out the list below for just some of the paradoxical issues in Native American writers treat:

Binaries

Binaries are pairs of choices, like the “ones” and “zeros” making up the information on cds. They offer a way of reducing things. Think about the either/or choices consumers are faced with. Authors can’t leave these binaries alone. . . they like to play with easy choices, showing how artificial they are. As I’ll say elsewhere, we don’t live in a simple world. It’s not all “Pepsi or Coke,” and authors like to challenge binaries.

Think about other examples of paradox you encounter. Be willing to share these.

General Stuff

If you get stuck interpreting, look for setting and conflict. You can always talk about those, and then get into more complex areas of the piece from these.

Binaries (otherwise known as polar oppositions or polar opposites) can be found in Native American literature. Here are some that I thought of quickly. What ones can you find?

<table>
<thead>
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<th>vs.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>Present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victimization</td>
<td>Triumph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richness (spiritual, physical)</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Paradoxical Binaries Treated by Native American Authors

Now look at what some Native authors do with seemingly simple binaries. You might find stories in which characters are:

- living in two cultural worlds simultaneously
- both rich and poor—ways of seeing wealth are confused, downplayed, or overwhelming Native Americans who act as “super patriots”

or in which

- past, present and future are seamlessly intermixed
- Christianity and Native roots get mixed without one winning out over the other
- victimization and triumph exist simultaneously, defining the same character tradition vs. modernity never gets solved or resolved for a character
- personal identity and communal identity cannot be separated
- identity exists—indeed independent of white culture
- mixed blood identity is the most important aspect of life for a character

This list probably makes little sense to you right now. It’s meant to get you thinking about the many “moves” you will see Indian writers make. Be active as a reader, and as a questioner! Let me know what sorts of things you see happening in our readings. Critical thinking is just that: critical. I am curious to see what you’ll find in this semester’s literature.

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Introduction to American Literature
Binaries: A Western Obsession

This or that? Me or you? I or thou? Subject or object?

Along with these basic either/or questions, Western thought is built on other key binaries.

A binary is an either/or choice like the zeroes and ones making up DVDs or other digital codes. While some things lend themselves to “this or that” choices, we know that the world is often much more complicated. The answer “Pepsi or Coke?” might define a person privately, but whether you like one or the other may not carry much public meaning. Ironically, it did carry meaning in the 80s during the Cola Wars.

These either/or choices often have strange histories. For instance, the tragedy/comedy binary informs genres on television and in literature. It is based on a thinker, Aristotle, who was not even approving of literature. Dig into the history of tragedy and comedy and you will find some strangeness. For instance, tragedy was supposed by Aristotle to feature someone making a choice which leads inevitably to their downfall, which we witness and feel catharsis, a sense of purging out of both ends…! Weird enough for you? It makes a certain amount of sense, just as listening to a blues song makes us feel happy, but it’s what we’d call contingent: based on a quirky, particular set of happenings that did not have to occur. So binaries are contingent. (Call this the non-tragic theory of approaching binaries.) And comedy was supposed to involve a mating and joining offstage in early Greek comedies—which were held at the festival of the god Dionysus, at which, originally, his devotees called Maenads were said to mate with willing victims on mountainsides, after which they would rend apart the sacrificial victim. And this is what informs our genres—and has done so for 2,500 years. So I’d add necessary vs. contingent as a binary that can be useful.

For more on the strangeness of binaries, you might do a search for humor theory or look at the history of academia (gowns, gavels, graduations…). Or if you’re talking good or evil, one might look at how evil always comes back (Sauron, Voldemort). Weirdly enough, this even contributes to a type of cannibalism whereby an enemy’s body is eaten so that his soul can be erased—for a time—from the eternal battlefield. As the cliche goes, “The truth is stranger than fiction.” In fields like literary analysis, there is no “capital-T Truth.” That idea of there being one would go back to Plato and his theory of Forms.

So these issues have histories of which we should become aware. As a critical reader, it is important for you to take note of binaries and gauge their effects. Though they may exclude other choices, it is the case that humans notice contrasts and oppositions.

Binaries are crutches, tools. They can work but can put blinders on what we notice. Early in stages of the writing or critical thinking processes, they can be useful.

Which side of a binary does the author notice or value more? Which views are portrayed as negative?

What is undervalued or missing from a given text? In a writing course, then, you might create a persuasive essay that argues one side against another. We contribute to these ongoing debates most thoughtfully if we realize that they arguments will continue, however well we write about them! Just don’t fall into the trap of thinking that the world is either/or, comforting as that notion may be.
Binaries: A Western Obsession. **Authored by:** Joshua Dickinson. **Provided by:** Jefferson Community College. **Located at:** [http://www.sunyjefferson.edu](http://www.sunyjefferson.edu). **Project:** Survey of Native American Literature. **License:** *CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike*
Introduction to Fiction

Click below for a video presentation that gives college students a brief introduction to fiction.

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The Difference Between Fiction and Nonfiction

Is all fiction literature? Is all nonfiction literature?

Fiction refers to literature created from the imagination. Mysteries, science fiction, romance, fantasy, chick lit, crime thrillers are all fiction genres. Whether or not all of these genres should be considered “literature” is a matter of opinion. Some of these fiction genres are taught in literature classrooms and some are not usually taught, considered more to be reading for entertainment. Works often taught in literature classrooms are referred to as “literary fiction” including classics by Dickens, Austen, Twain, and Poe, for example.

Like fiction, non-fiction also has a sub-genre called “literary nonfiction” that refers to literature based on fact but written in creative way, making it as enjoyable to read as fiction. Of course there are MANY other types of nonfiction such as cook books, fitness articles, crafting manuals, etc. which are not “literature,” meaning not the types of works we would study in a literature classroom. However, you may not be aware of the many types of nonfiction we would study, such as biography, memoir or autobiography, essays, speeches, and humor. Of these literary nonfiction genres, they can be long like a book or series of books or short like an essay or journal entry. Some examples of these you are already familiar with, like The Diary of Anne Frank or Angela’s Ashes by Frank McCourt. These works of literary nonfiction have character, setting, plot, conflict, figurative language, and theme just like literary fiction.

Clarification: The test of categorizing a work between fiction and non-fiction is not whether there is proof the story is true, but whether it CLAIMS to be true. For example, someone writing a firsthand account of being abducted by aliens would be classified in the nonfiction section, meaning the author claims it really happened. Further, a story in which imaginary characters are set into real historical events is still classified as fiction.

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Introduction to Creative Nonfiction

Click below for a short video that gives college students a brief introduction to creative nonfiction.

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What Terms do we use When Naming Writers?

Is there a right way to identify our authors or Native Americans?

Many Native Americans prefer to be called by their group names (i.e., Mohawk). This makes sense. Still others argue that “Native Americans” is an improvement over “Indians.” Others note that the word “Indian” translates from in Dios, which means “with or in God.” Regardless of their reasons, many Native people continue to use the term Indian.

This debate also brings up the following questions:

- How do we negotiate between personal, communal, and national identities?
- How does our use of language mark us, carrying historical connotations we often cannot control? Why is the debate over naming—like the debates over mascots—inherently political?

I take my prompt for the use of “Indian” from the historian James Wilson, who includes a note about his own use of the term. Nearby in Canada, they use terms like first nations people or even aboriginal. I use these terms as well, though I am aware that each differs in connotations.

It may be best if you work from the group outward, naming an author by their tribal affiliation if you know it.

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- What Terms do we use When Naming Writers?. **Authored by:** Joshua Dickinson. **Provided by:** Jefferson Community College. **Located at:** [http://www.sunyjefferson.edu](http://www.sunyjefferson.edu). **Project:** Survey of Native American Literature. **License:** [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)
IV

Chapter 2: Literary Conventions
Self-Diagnosis of One's Writing Ailments can be Fun!

Is using plain language the law?

The following humorous site, “How to Write Good,” is located on the Plainlanguage.gov page. It lists and breaks several writing rules. In breaking the rules, they illustrate them. It is an engaging way to learn the rules of English—especially since they always seem to have exceptions.

Note that not all of the rules are really rules anymore. For instance, the one about ending a sentence on a preposition is one we have largely gotten out of. (Get it?)

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- Self-Diagnosis of One's Writing Ailments can be Fun!. **Authored by:** PLAIN. **Provided by:** PLAIN. **Located at:** [http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/humor/writegood.cfm](http://www.plainlanguage.gov/examples/humor/writegood.cfm). **Project:** Survey of Native American Literature. **License:** [CC BY-NC-SA: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)
Literary Terms

To discuss and analyze literature it is important to know some of the basic terms and expressions used within the subject area. The following glossary covers the most widely used terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>allegory</td>
<td>Simply put, an allegory is a narrative that has a symbolic meaning. That is, the whole story, its plot, characters and often setting, are all elements that signify a second correlated narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alliteration</td>
<td>Alliteration is when a text (most often poetry, but also prose) has three or more succeeding words that start with the same sound. It is usually applied to consonants, either at the beginning of the word or on a stressed syllable within the word.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allusion</td>
<td>In a literary work there will often be a brief reference to a person, place, event or to another literary work. This is called an allusion, and was very common in classic and romantic poetry which had many references to ancient mythology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ambiguity</td>
<td>Ambiguity means double meaning. It is a common literary technique in both poetry and prose to use words and expressions with multiple meanings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atmosphere</td>
<td>The word covers the mood or ambience that the writer creates in his narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>biography</td>
<td>A biography is, simply put, the story of a person’s life. It is a popular genre; people love to read about the lives of famous persons. An autobiography is a biography written by the person himself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blank verse</td>
<td>Blank verse is when a poem (of a certain metric pattern) has no end rhymes. Many of Shakespeare’s texts, both his plays and poems are in blank verse. It will then have a certain melodic rhythm that comes alive when it is recited.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>character and characterization</td>
<td>Character refers to the person(s) in a narrative or a play. They can be described directly (through the narrator) or indirectly (through the eyes of other characters. We also use the terms flat or round characters to indicate their complexity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clichè</td>
<td>A verbal clichè is a fixed and often used expression. A structural clichè is a common and predictable element of a narrative. It can be either a character or a turn of the plot. In film and literature clichè are negative elements, since they indicate lack of creativity, both in terms of language and plot arrangements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comedy</td>
<td>A comedy is a play or a film that puts the audience in a good and safe mood. Certain techniques are used to create a good comedy, e.g. mistaken identity and misunderstandings. The audience will be amused and confident that things will turn out happily for the characters (at least the ones who deserve it).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>connotation</td>
<td>Connotation is the same as denotation, and means that a word (mostly in poetry) has a different meaning than it has in everyday use. E.g. “cold” will in colloquial settings mean low temperature, but as a connotation it may also mean e.g. heartless or unfeeling.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When certain opposites are juxtaposed, or put up against each other, e.g. two scenes in a film, this will highlight the contrast between them. The effect is that the two elements will mutually amplify each other.

This is one of the main literary genes (epic, lyric, dramatic) and will denote a narrative which is told like a story or a plot. There are many sub-genres of epic literature.

Originally this means some sort of inscription. It is a short, pointed poem that is often witty and well composed with a striking punch line.

Epiphany in Greek means “manifestation of God.” In literature it means a sudden and often spiritual awakening, like when a character suddenly sees with clarity the way out of a predicament or a dilemma.

An essay is a composition about a topic, often arguing a certain thesis or stating a point of view.

Fiction, or a fictive narrative is invented, as opposed to a factual presentation of events that are historically true.

To foreshadow is to place hints or bits of information that will lead the reader to an anticipation of the outcome of the narrative. The opening parts of a novel or a short-story will often hold elements of foreshadowing.

Genre is French and means type or form; it is used to categorize literature in groups according to certain criteria.

In architecture, Gothic means the pointed style that broke with the traditional Roman rounded form of arches and ceilings in cathedrals. In literature the word is used about the type of novels of the late 18th century, containing eerie ingredients like ghosts in derelict castles with dark hallways and hidden doors. Other elements would include violent action, occultism and sorcery.

This is an alternative denotation of the Renaissance (1550-1650), and it signifies the human as a master of his universe; man is able to seek within himself for answers, but must also appreciate his own shortcomings and inner contradictions.

Hyperbole comes from Greek and means to exaggerate, as opposed to an understatement, which is a blunt way of making a statement by giving it less significance than it really has; e.g to say “bad luck” when a disaster has struck.

Imagery is a common term in modern literary theory; it describes poetry that is rich with suggestive images and associations.

In colloquial speech irony means to say the opposite of what one really means (verbal irony). In literature one also has this verbal irony, but also what is called structural irony, where the writer gives his plot a turn that can be read with a double meaning. In a short-story there may be an ironic twist at the ending to sum up the theme.

A metaphor is a figure of speech where two or more elements of a different nature are compared with each other, but without “like” or “as”. If the comparison includes “like” or “as” it is called a simile.

Meter is a collective term for the rhythmic pattern of a poem. There are a number of metric systems. A text written in meter is called a verse.
motif
Note the spelling. A motif is a recurring element in a literary text. It may be an incident or a phrase that occurs in different situations and settings through the text.

Originially a myth is a story derived from mythology, e.g. the ancient religions of Greece and Rome, or Norse mythology. At the time the myth was believed to be true. The story of gods and supernatural beings is a myth, but if the protagonist is a man it is called a legend.

myth and legend
Today a myth will usually mean something which is a popular claim, but it is not true.

narrator and narrative
The narrator is the one that relates the story, and whose information unfolds the plot. The narrative is the story itself.

A novel can be defined as a substantial narrative with many characters and a plot that stretches over a long time span (not always) and may have many settings. There are many sub-categories.

novel

omniscient
To be omniscient means “to know it all,” and is used about a narrator who is everywhere in the story and can reveal the thoughts of all the characters.

paradox
A paradox is a phrase or statement which seems self-contradictory, but turns out to have a valid meaning after all. “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (Shakespeare, Macbeth) is an example of a literary paradox.

pathos
Pathos is Greek and means deep feeling or passion. Today we associate pathos with a slightly overexposed sentimentality designed to evoke pity or compassion of the reader or a theatre audience.

plot
The plot is the structure and order of actions in a narrative text or a play.

point of view
The point of view is also called “angle” and signifies the way a narrative is told, and from where. The point of view will be the eyes through which we see the narrative.

protagonist
The protagonist is the main character of a narrative. There will also be sub-characters that the protagonist relatesto.

satire
A satire is a narrative which will expose a questionable practice or element in a subtle and “concealed” way. A satire can be funny, but has a serious intent.

setting
The setting of a narrative or a play will define where and when the plot takes place. The setting will always be strongly related to the plot, and will include description of weather and light / dark.

short story
A short story is exactly that – a short story. It has a condensed plot that evolves over a short time span, and has few characters.

soliloquy
This term is used in dramatic literature and means that the actor is speaking to himself, or “aside” as it also is called. It is widely used in many of Shakespeare’s plays. “Stream of consciousness” was a term which was introduced during modernism, and means that the narrative is based on what goes on in the mind of a protagonist. It is also called interior monologue.

stream of consciousness

style
The style is the way the writer arranges his narrative and his choice of words. The style will be closely connected to the mood and atmosphere.

symbol
A symbol is an object, expression or event that represents an idea beyond itself. The weather and light/darkness will often have a symbolic meaning.

tragedy
In a tragedy an innocent protagonist will be involved in escalating circumstances with a fatal result. The tragic development is either caused by a flaw in the character’s personality or by events that evolve beyond his control.
theme

The theme of a narrative or a play is the general idea or underlying message that the writer wants to expose.

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Elements of Literature

These are the Elements of Literature, the things that make up every story. This is the first of two videos.

These are the elements of literature with Mr. Taylor.

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Proper Source Use in Paragraphs

Function of Source Use

You use sources as a form of backup for what you write. They support your claims. This means that you own your paper.

Consequences of the String of Pearls Effect

Using a single source several times in a row and then moving on as if some writing occurred is a common writing problem. How great a percentage of an average body paragraph should come from the source? Answers vary, of course, depending on your purpose and the sophistication of your topic. However, if you consistently let the sources take over more than one-third of your body paragraphs, you will not be a successful arguer, thinker, or writer.

If you consistently string together a bunch of quotes, then readers are left with unused material. If you have two or three quotes in a row, that means you did not interpret them. For some reason, many writers think that the quotation marks are magic, as if the quotes speak—or mean something—for themselves. They don’t. If you think of the quotes as excuses for you to discuss their meaning, you will be much better off.

We call the stringing together of paraphrases or quotes “the string of pearls effect.” What is the effect on readers of such lists?

I usually tell students that readers need lots of prompts and reminders. Say things again, even if you think the quote did a good job of making meaning. Tell readers what something means—just don’t use “I” or “you” as you follow up on the quote. The ends of paragraphs are where things tend to fall apart, I think. Succeed in synthesizing your source, in using it and proving the meaning of source information.

With cited material, follow up by

1. linking the paraphrase/quote to the paragraph’s topic sentence,
2. linking the cited information to the thesis
3. restating the relevance, credibility, or context of the source material
4. setting up a transition to the upcoming paragraph(s)
5. using a signal phrase like “In other words, . . .” and launching into a direct interpretation of the cited bit

Use your options. Take an active approach so papers—especially the research essay—actually use the sources actively.

A Typical Paragraph Pattern
Survey of Native American Literature

(Remember, though, that this is not a formula. Vary your paragraphs, sentences, details, appeals, etc.)

Topic sentence. This is your own. Avoid starting w/quote (Why is this so?) setup for source use (1-3 sentences)
source use (quote then cite, or paraphrase one sentence then cite)
direct interpretation of the quote’s words or the paraphrase’s meaning(s) (1-4 sentences, right?) paragraph
closing/transition/restated topic sentence/link to thesis
End the paragraph on your own with emphasis and power.

In large part, how well you do from here on out depends on how well you learn MLA citing and the standards of writing academic arguments. If we’re stuck with poorly-written paragraphs, the papers will only reach a certain level of quality.

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Using Sources: Blending Source Material with Your Own Work

When working with sources, many students worry they are simply regurgitating ideas that others formulated. That is why it is important for you to develop your own assertions, organize your findings so that your own ideas are still the thrust of the paper, and take care not to rely too much on any one source, or your paper’s content might be controlled too heavily by that source.

In practical terms, some ways to develop and back up your assertions include:

Blend sources with your assertions. Organize your sources before and as you write so that they blend, even within paragraphs. Your paper—both globally and at the paragraph level—should reveal relationships among your sources, and should also reveal the relationships between your own ideas and those of your sources.

Write an original introduction and conclusion. As much as is practical, make the paper’s introduction and conclusion your own ideas or your own synthesis of the ideas inherent in your research. Use sources minimally in your introduction and conclusion.

Open and close paragraphs with originality. In general, use the openings and closing of your paragraphs to reveal your work—“enclose” your sources among your assertions. At a minimum, create your own topic sentences and wrap-up sentences for paragraphs.

Use transparent rhetorical strategies. When appropriate, outwardly practice such rhetorical strategies as analysis, synthesis, comparison, contrast, summary, description, definition, hierarchical structure, evaluation, hypothesis, generalization, classification, and even narration. Prove to your reader that you are thinking as you write.

Also, you must clarify where your own ideas end and the cited information begins. Part of your job is to help your reader draw the line between these two things, often by the way you create context for the cited information. A phrase such as “A 1979 study revealed that . . .” is an obvious announcement of citation to come. Another recommended technique is the insertion of the author’s name into the text to announce the beginning of your cited information. You may worry that you are not allowed to give the actual names of sources you have studied in the paper’s text, but just the opposite is true. In fact, the more respectable a source you cite, the more impressed your reader is likely to be with your material while reading. If you note that the source is the NASA Science website or an article by Stephen Jay Gould or a recent edition of The Wall Street Journal right in your text, you offer your readers immediate context without their having to guess or flip to the references page to look up the source.

What follows is an excerpt from a political science paper that clearly and admirably draws the line between writer and cited information:

The above political upheaval illuminates the reasons behind the growing Iranian hatred of foreign interference; as a result of this hatred, three enduring geopolitical patterns have evolved in Iran, as noted by John Limbert. First . . .

Note how the writer begins by redefining her previous paragraph’s topic (political upheaval), then
connects this to Iran’s hatred of foreign interference, then suggests a causal relationship and ties her ideas into John Limbert’s analysis—thereby announcing that a synthesis of Limbert’s work is coming. This writer’s work also becomes more credible and meaningful because, right in the text, she announces the name of a person who is a recognized authority in the field. Even in this short excerpt, it is obvious that this writer is using proper citation and backing up her own assertions with confidence and style.

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Use Signal Phrases in Posts, Essays, and Tests

Good readers will look for the way you set up your quotes as well as the way you interpret them. Use signal phrases to ensure smooth paragraphs.

As I keep mentioning, good writers are writers who know their options. Often, a well-placed word or phrase is necessary to guide readers. Signal phrases also separate your ideas from the source’s ideas. This is crucial.

Here are some verbs you might use for strong signal phrases. Notice how they give away the author’s tone. Of course, the catch is that you’ll have to understand the quote and the author’s tone, which is the author’s attitude toward the work. This is the tough part! Here are some ready-made options for you:

Author is neutral

comments, describes, explains, illustrates, notes, observes, points out, records, relates, reports, says, sees, thinks, writes

Author infers or suggests

analyzes, asks, assesses, concludes, considers, finds, predicts, proposes, reveals, shows, speculates, suggests, supposes

Author argues

claims, contends, defends, holds, insists, maintains

agrees

avers, admits, grants, concedes, notes, agrees

Author is uneasy or disparaging

belittles, bemoans, complains, confesses, condemns, deplores, deprecates, derides, disagrees, laments, warns. (Notice how the de– prefix here lets us know that what follows goes away or from. These words have much different tones from the “togetherness” of co– com– prefixes. Little effects like this aren’t lost on careful readers!)

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The Rough Guide to Literary Style, a Historical Overview

Literary style can be defined as how a writer decides to express whatever he wants to say; his choice of words, the sentence structure, syntax, language (figurative or metaphorical). Writing is more than telling a story or coming up with an interesting plot; for the writer it is an essential part of the writing process to select the words and language carefully and to develop his own personal style. In this article we will present some examples of different literary styles throughout history, and briefly discuss their effect on the reader, both at the time they were written and today. When you have studied the article and the examples, follow the link at the bottom for tasks and activities.

The Old Style

Reading old texts, for example from the Renaissance, can be a bit of a challenge for a modern reader. Scholars and writers at the time would often excel in rhetorical devices to show their verbal skills; sentences were long and intricate with many diversions and sub clauses. Many people were illiterate, and reading, let alone writing, was reserved for the cultural elite, and was seen as evidence of intellectual status. The following is a quote from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678):

> Then I saw in my dream, that when they were got out of the wilderness, they presently saw a town before them, and the name of that town is Vanity; and at the town there is a fair kept, called Vanity Fair, because the town where it is kept is lighter than vanity; and also because all that is there sold, or what cometh thither, is vanity.

What we note here is that the paragraph is one long sentence, which is made up of clauses linked by connectors (comma, semicolon, and, because). This is called a “periodic sentence” because the conclusion of the sentence is suspended until the end. The style is oratorical and formal, and the immediate effect on the modern reader is most likely impatience, because there are so many subclauses and additional information. The reader may want to find the point of the information, but in renaissance literature the ornamental language was a point on its own.

During the 16th and 17th centuries writers skillfully expressed themselves in a poetic language mainly designed for recital. The theatre was a popular cultural venue, where people came to follow the great works of William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlow, two of the great playwrights of the time. Many Shakespearian plots were often traditional or perhaps even stolen from some other source, but Shakespeare was the unchallenged master of language. The following extract is the opening lines of *Twelfth Night* (1601):

> If music be the food of love, play on, Give me excess of it; that, surfeiting The appetite may sicken, and so die…
That strain again, it had a dying fall:

O, it came o’er my ear like the sweet south That

breathes upon a bank of violets; Stealing and

giving odour… (-) Enough, No more!

The style may seem both theatrical and pompous, but that was the literary ideal during the Renaissance, and the theatre audience loved it. Many modern readers also embrace this musical language; Shakespeare’s eloquent style is still recognized as supreme literary craftsmanship.

Science and Facts

The style of the Enlightenment writers was more informative and scientifically to the point. Their choice of words and narrative style were influenced by the predominant ideals of the time – science, facts and lexical information. The following example is from Robinson Crusoe (1719) by Daniel Defoe. Robinson has just survived the shipwreck and is on a raft approaching the island that is to become his home for the next 28 years:

At length I spy’d a little Cove on the right Shore of the Creek, to which with great Pain and Difficulty I guided my Raft, and at last got so near, as that, reaching Ground with my Oar, I could thrust her directly in, but here I had like to have dipt all my Cargo in the Sea again; for that Shore lying pretty steep, that is to say sloping, there was no Place to land, but where one End of my Float, if it run on Shore, it would endanger my Cargo again.

This descriptive and rational style is typical of the era. We also see, as with John Bunyan, that the whole paragraph is one long sentence with many clauses. The informative style worked well for contemporary readers who were hungry for accounts about explorations and scientific experiments. The effect on a modern reader may of course be rather tedious as the detailed information is so meticulously laid out. An interesting detail is the capitalization of nouns, which was a common feature of enlightenment literature.

The Romantic Touch

Prose from the Romantic Era is also characterized by a somewhat elevated style, but as the two following examples will show, the style now becomes more accessible for modern readers, with shorter sentences and a more colloquial language. But the choice of words clearly reveals that this is the time of strong emotions and moral reflections. The first example is from Jane Eyre by Charlotte Brontë (1847):

I had forgotten to draw my curtain, which I usually did, and also to let down my window-blind. The consequence was, that when the moon, which was full and bright (for the night
was fine), came in her course to that space in the sky opposite my casement, and looked in at me through the unveiled panes, her glorious gaze roused me. Awakening in the dead of night, I opened my eyes on her disc – silver-white and crystal clear. It was beautiful, but not too solemn: I half rose and stretched my arm to draw the curtain.

The poetic style exemplifies the romantic ideals brilliantly; it is like a lyrical prose text with elements usually associated with poetry. The next example is from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813):

The discussion of Mr Collins’s offer was now nearly at an end, and Elizabeth had only to suffer from uncomfortable feelings necessarily attending it, and occasionally from some peevish allusion of her mother. As for the gentleman himself, his feelings were chiefly expressed, not by embarrassment, or dejection, or by trying to avoid her, but by stiffness of manner and resentful silence.

The style here is also purely romantic; Austen’s choice of words reflects the morals and the conventions that were predominant with the upper classes at the time. To a modern reader the style may seem a bit formal, but Jane Austen portrayed her time and its virtues in an accurate manner. Austen’s popularity clearly shows that her style also goes down well with modern readers.

**Realism**

During the Victorian Age (or Realism as the era is referred to on the continent) literary style became more diverse as writers now more than before developed their own personal style. Victorian writers wanted to display reality in all its details, for better or worse. If we look at Charles Dickens, who is recognized as the most prominent Victorian novelist, his style is quite unique with its precise and visual descriptions. People and places are painted for the reader down to the smallest details. The following example is from *Oliver Twist* (1838):

It was market morning. The ground was covered, nearly ankle-deep, with filth and mire; and a thick steam, perpetually rising from the reeking bodies of the cattle, and mingling with the fog, which seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops, hung heavily above. All the pens in the centre of the large area, and as many temporary pens as could be crowded into the vacant space, were filled with sheep; tied up to post by the gutter side were long lines of beasts and oxen, three of four deep. Countrymen, butchers, drovers, hawkers, boys, thieves, idlers, and vagabonds of every low grade were mingled in a mass; the whistling of drovers, the barking of dogs, the bellowing and plunging of oxen, the bleating of sheep, the grunting and squeaking of pigs…

This is the typical Dickensian style; he paints a picture so vivid and detailed that the reader is able to see, hear and smell the scene. Here, too, the paragraph consists of three long sentences (apart from the brief introduction). Dickens’ hang to meticulous descriptions is also reflected in his narrative style; the main plot is intertwined with sub-plots and more or less related side stories that seem to lead in different directions. Reading Dickens is like slow speed skating – you go left and right as you also gradually move forward. To many modern readers Dickens’ style may be a bit overwhelming, there is
simply too much to take in. On the other hand, few other writers – if any – have been able to paint such an accurate picture of their contemporary society.

The next example of literary style from the mid-19th century is taken from Mark Twain’s *Life on the Mississippi* (1874), where Twain writes about his training to become a pilot on the river:

> Now the engines were stopped altogether, and we drifted with the current. Not that I could see the boat drift, for I could not, the stars being all gone by this time. This drifting was the dismallest work; it held one’s heart still. Presently I discovered a blacker gloom than that which surrounded us. It was the head of the island. We were closing right down upon it. We entered it deeper shadow, ad so imminent seemed the peril that I was likely to suffocate; and I had the strongest impulse to do something, anything, to save the vessel. But still Mr Bixby stood by his wheel, silent, intent as a cat, and all the pilots stood shoulder to shoulder at his back. “She’ll not make it! Somebody whispered.

Note how the style here is totally different from Dickens’ picturesque description of the market scene. Mark Twain’s style is subtler and more subdued, nevertheless he communicates the scene brilliantly; we feel the intensity of the moments before the steamer hits land. This may also be a consequence of Mark Twain’s narrative angle, as he relates this in an autobiographical way, from a 1st person angle.

**Less is More**

During the first half of the 20th century literary style became even more diverse. Many writers now wanted to experiment with their art, and literature became complex and abstract. Some writers took it to the limit and their texts were close to unintelligible for the ordinary reader. Here we will present two examples of a more moderate modernist literary style. James Joyce is probably the prime exponent of the experimental modernist style, but the following example from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), his debut, is quite straightforward – though it carries elements of the style he would develop in his later works:

> She had passed through the dusk. And therefore the air was silent save for one soft hiss that fell. And therefore the tongues about him had ceased their babble. Darkness was falling.

The style of these silent and poetic lines has an intriguing effect on the reader. Joyce’s choice of words makes the reader reflect: Why was the air silent because “she had passed through the dusk”? Note also: “passed through the dusk” instead of “walked through the evening”. And at the end is a sentence of just three words; it is a brilliant example of minimalist, poetic prose.

Another modernist writer who became famous for his minimalist style was Ernest Hemingway. His literary style was to economize information to the point that what is left unsaid is more important than what is said. A famous example is when Hemingway accepted the challenge of writing a novel in six words, and came up with: “For Sale. Baby Shoes. Never Worn.” This example of Hemingway’s short-cut style is from the novel *The Sun Also Rises* (1926):
It was dim and dark and the pillars went high up, and there were people praying, and it smelt of incense, and there were some wonderful big buildings.

In this very brief and to-the-point description, Hemingway gives the reader as little information as possible, but enough to set the mood or atmosphere of the scene. The sentence consists of five independent clauses connected with “and.” In his short story *Indian Camp* (1924) Hemingway takes his minimalist style even further by omitting the connecting “ands”:

The sun was coming over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.

If we compare this with, for example, Charles Dickens’ market scene we see a totally different narrative style that demands more from the reader. We are not given all the details; the full effect of the text depends on what the reader is able to add to it. The Norwegian author Tarjei Vesaas is another prime example of this poetic minimalism; he would often omit all unnecessary connectors (“and,” “or,” “because”…), and present his narrative like a naked skeleton for the reader to dress up.

**The Style is the Trial**

Writers at all times have worked with words to develop their own personal style, influenced by their cultural and social environment, and driven by an unstoppable urge to express themselves. They struggle with words and literary devices to get their message across exactly the way they want it. Writing is a remarkable profession; it takes some talent and creativity, certainly some commitment – and a lot of work. The German writer Thomas Mann put it like this: “It is a struggle – spending hour after hour, even days fighting with just one sentence; a good day is when I have completed some lines.” Most writers are perfectionists; the bulk of what they write is simply tossed in the bin. American contemporary novelist Paul Auster even said: “Don’t do it if you don’t have to. It’s a curse!” Discouraging advice for aspiring writers!

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Irony

Defining Irony

Irony is all about noticing contrast. No noticing by you = inaccurate interpretations.

Verbal irony occurs when the intended meaning and the stated meaning are different—and usually opposite. Huh? Let me clarify. Irony is when the connotation is the opposite of the denotation. Connotations are the contexts, the situations and feelings around a word. Denotations are the dictionary definitions surrounding a word.

When these don’t match up, a space is created. You see that space, and you react to it by giving that situation meaning.

Exemplifying Verbal Irony

Irony is like sarcasm. For example, if I said “That’s a Great tie” to someone with an extremely ugly tie, you would hear the tone in which I said it, right? You could look up “Great” in the dictionary and find that it means good, admirable, wonderful, etc. But “good” is opposite of the usage, right? I mean, I said it so he’d see it was ugly and bad. Some critics dispute this connection between sarcasm and irony.

How to Approach Irony

Ask questions about irony. Use the term in your discussions and your papers.

Do you think you’ll see irony in the works we’ll read? Will it be used in the same ways?

If irony is the difference between the stated meaning and the intended meaning, then is it used by all cultures?

Dramatic and Situation Irony: The Sidekick Types

Dramatic irony arises when an audience knows more about a situation than the character(s). The characters say or do something whose significance they don’t know. For example, you go to *Oedipus the King* knowing that he has married his mom. You know this, he doesn’t. So, as he discovers this, you watch and appreciate it.

Situational irony would result from a gapping—a difference—between what readers expect and what actually occurs. This is not to be confused with the popular misconception that irony occurs when something surprising or coincidental occurs. (Think of that 90s song by Alanis Morissette, “Isn’t it Ironic?” which actually featured nonexamples of irony. Now that’s ironic!)
The Irony” by Jack Sirichumsaeng is licensed under CC BY 2.0

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Theme

The theme is the main idea, lesson or message in the novel. It usually states an idea about humans, society or life.

You will often be asked to analyze how the theme is expressed. Study the novel to check if any elements are repeated that may suggest a theme. Is there more than one theme? In the Harry Potter stories there may be many themes. One of the most important must be the value of being modest. Harry does not boast, he is humble, loyal and good. That is why he succeeds in the end. This is the lesson that Rowling wants to pass on to us. We are clearly shown what happens to the characters that are selfish and mean.

- The theme is the main idea in the story.
- The message is the lesson the author wants to teach us.

Theme can also be expressed as

- the underlying meaning of a literary work, a general truth about life or mankind.

A theme is the general subject the story revolves around. It often represents universal and timeless ideas that are relevant in most people’s lives.

Even though a novel may have an action-packed story, the underlying theme may be to stick to your friends and be loyal – as in Harry Potter.
Conflict

If stories were without conflicts or tension, we would be easily bored. The conflict is usually the heart of the story and revolves around the main character. What does Harry struggle with? The main conflict is Harry’s attempt to stop Voldemort, the murderer of his parents, from stealing the Philosopher’s Stone. So, it is a classical fight between good and evil forces. We also note that the world of the wizards clashes with the world of the Muggles, where the Muggles are represented by the stupid Dursleys. These are outer conflicts threatening Harry. However, there are also conflicts going on inside Harry; like, should he:

- Avenge the murder of his parents?
- Live by the wizard rules and obligations? Punish
- the Dursleys for treating him so badly? Boast of
- his skills and abilities?
- Be loyal to his friends?

Conflicts are important to stories to make them interesting. There may be outer and inner conflicts.

Conflict: a struggle between opposing forces.

A conflict is a misunderstanding or clash of interests that develops in the story. This often occurs between main characters. It drives the story forward and creates suspense. If a story had no conflict, it would be very boring. A conflict is basically a situation which has to change.

Examples

In a story where someone finds a lump of gold, the conflicts will probably revolve around who gets to keep this gold. The conflict here would involve greed.

If a plane crashes in the mountains, the conflict will deal with survival. But conflicts may also be on a personal level—like in novels where a person struggles with emotional issues or moral dilemmas.

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Symbols in Literature

What is a symbol? How are they used in literature? How can you interpret them and how do they relate to theme? Take a minute to learn more here!

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Symbolism

A short video explaining symbols in literature.

Definition of symbolism with examples of poems using symbolism.

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Characters and Characterization

The characters are the persons that are involved in the story. Obviously, Harry Potter is the main character. The main character is often called the protagonist. Since *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* is a novel, we meet many other characters as well.

How are the characters described? In the novel we are admitted to Harry’s thoughts and fears and based on that, we can say something about Harry as well as his relationship with other characters.

Extracts from the Novel

Study the extracts and then answer the questions which follow.
Extracts from the first chapter of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* used in the analysis.

**Extract 1**

If the motorcycle was huge, it was nothing to the man sitting astride it. He was almost twice as tall as a normal man and at least five times as wide. He looked simply too big to be allowed, and so wild – long tangles of bushy black hair and beard hid most of his face, he had hands the size of trash can lids, and his feet in their leather boots were like baby dolphins. In his vast, muscular arms he was holding a bundle of blankets. (Description of Hagrid)

**Extract 2**

“S–s–sorry,” sobbed Hagrid, taking out a large, spotted handkerchief and burying his face in it. “But I c- c-can’t stand it – Lily and James dead – an’ poor little Harry off ter live with Muggles –” (Hagrid talks about Harry’s dead parents and how he has to stay with the humans, the Muggles)

**Extract 3**

“Yes, yes, it’s all very sad, but get a grip on yourself, Hagrid, or we’ll be found,” Professor McGonagall whispered, patting Hagrid gingerly on the arm as Dumbledore stepped over the low garden wall and walked to the front door. He laid Harry gently on the doorstep, took a letter out of his cloak, tucked it inside Harry’s blankets, and then came back to the other two. For a full minute the three of them stood and looked at the little bundle; Hagrid’s shoulders shook, Professor McGonagall blinked furiously, and the twinkling light that usually shone from Dumbledore’s eyes seemed to have gone out. (From the delivery of the orphan Harry at the Dursleys’ doorstep)

**Extract 4**

“Look”– he murmured, holding out his arm to stop Malfoy. Something bright white was gleaming on the ground. They inched closer. It was the unicorn, all right, and it was dead. Harry had never seen anything so beautiful and sad. Its long, slender legs were stuck out at odd angles where it had fallen and its mane was spread pearly white on the dark leaves. Harry had taken one step toward it when a slithering sound made him freeze where he stood. A bush on the edge of the clearing quivered… Then, out of the shadows, a hooded figure came crawling across the ground like some stalking beast. Harry, Malfoy, and Fang stood transfixed. The cloaked figure reached the unicorn, lowered
its head over the wound in the animal’s side, and began to drink its blood. (from the first time Harry meets Voldemort)

Exercises

Study Extracts 1, 2 and 3

1. How does the author introduce us to Hagrid and Professor Dumbledore? What kind of impression do you get? Do you like them? Why?
2. Describe in your own words Hagrid’s looks.
3. How is speech used to describe the characters?

Villains/Antagonists

In most novels we will also meet some “bad guys.” They are often called villains or antagonists. How do we know that they are evil? Study Extract 4 above.

1. Describe in your own words Voldemort’s looks and behavior.
2. How does the author tell us that Voldemort is an evil character (an antagonist)?

Character Development

Throughout the story Harry changes a lot. He develops from a loner into a sociable, more mature guy, and he also has to admit that he is mistaken. One of the characters that he thinks is “a bad guy” is actually “a good guy”! In most reports you will be asked to write a characterization of one of the main characters and to comment if they have changed, or not.

Terminology

- The characters are the persons we meet in the story.
- Characterization is a description of the characters.
- The protagonist is the main character, often the hero of the story.
- The antagonist is the villain or enemy in the story.
Metaphor

How do metaphors help us better understand the world? And, what makes a good metaphor? Explore these questions with writers like Langston Hughes and Carl Sandburg, who have mastered the art of bringing a scene or emotion to life.

Lesson by Jane Hirshfield, animation by Ben Pearce.

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- The art of the metaphor - Jane Hirshfield. Authored by: TED-Ed. Located at: https://youtu.be/A0edKgL9EgM. License: All Rights Reserved. License Terms: Standard YouTube License
Point of View

Learn the different kinds of narrative POV: reliable first person, unreliable first person, omniscient third person, limited third person, objective third person, and even the rarely-used second person. Also, better understand why understanding POV is an important life skill, beyond the writing or study of literature.

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Perspective and Point of View

Chapter 3: Writing About Literature

Annotation: Why Mark Up Your Texts?

Marking up your book properly is a survival skill in college literature classes. Most instructors expect you to develop your own system for noting “significant stuff” when reading. Marking up your book will allow you to locate information while testing.

Even if you are renting a text or reading it on a Kindle or other device, there are annotation tools. In fact, some of the electronic tools can allow you collection your annotations.

How to Mark Up Your Book

There is no set way to mark up a text, but active readers tend to do several of the following things:

- Underline important passages. As an alternative, you could put vertical lines in the margin next to important areas.
- Put ?, ! or questions of your own in the margins next to confusing or surprising passages. This way, you won’t have to stop your reading for too long in order to look up words, phrases, etc.
- Draw lines and arrows between connected ideas. Try and find your own level of connections so that these become more meaningful.
- List concepts, themes, or the names of other authors in the margins. These indicate connections.
- List the page number or beginning of a quote similar to the one you’re annotating. Connect one quote with another. Quotes can be linked based on similarity, difference, emphasis, subtlety, etc. It’s up to you.
- Doubt the author. Be skeptical this in the margins! Insults work, too... Use literary terms like irony, ambiguity, symbolism, tone to indicate where the author is making these moves.
- Create your own shorthand for marking the book. This could be as simple as using the triangle (delta), the mathematical symbol for change. I have a bunch of these. Seriously, this works.

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Connecting Reading & Writing: The Voice You Hear Response

Too often, reading is viewed as a passive act where the information is poured into static readers’ minds. To succeed at the college level, a reworking of the way one reads may be necessary. Read the following passage from reading researcher Katherine McCormick and jot down your interpretation of its meaning:

Tony slowly got up from the mat, planning his escape. He hesitated a moment and thought. Things were not going well. What bothered him the most was being held, especially since the charge against him had been weak. He considered his present situation. The lock that held him was strong but he thought he could break it . . . . He was being ridden unmercifully . . . . He felt that he was ready to make his move.

From the two possible interpretations here, it seems clear that 1) readers use their previous experiences to make meaning out of a text, and 2) context influences meaning. After all, if we knew we were reading a short story on wrestling, our understanding of the passage would differ. Reading needs to be recognized as an active process. Read the following poem by Thomas Lux and answer all of the questions below in complete sentences. The questions appear after the poem.

The Voice You Hear When You Read Silently

is not silent, it is a speaking-out-loud voice in your head; it is

spoken, a voice is saying it as you read.

It’s the writer’s words, of course, in a literary sense his or her “voice” but the sound of that voice is the sound of your voice.

Not the sound your friends know or the sound of a tape played back but your voice

captured in the dark cathedral of your skull, your voice heard by an internal ear

informed by internal abstractions

and what you know by feeling, having felt.

It is your voice saying, for example, the word “barn” that the writer wrote but the “barn” you say is a barn you know or knew.

The voice in your head, speaking as you read, never says anything neutrally—some people hated the barn they knew,
some people love the barn they know

so you hear the word loaded and a sensory constellation is lit:

horse-gnawed stalls, hayloft, black heat tape wrapping a water pipe, a

slippery spilled *chirr* of oats from a split sack,

the bony, filthy haunches of cows . . .

And “barn” is only a noun–no verb or subject has entered into the sentence yet!

The voice you hear when you read to yourself is the clearest voice: you speak its speaking to you.

1. When you hear the word *barn*, what barn or barns from your own life do you first see? What feelings and associations do you have with this word? How do you think the barn in your head is different from the barns in your classmates’ heads?

2. When you hear the word *cathedral*, what images and associations from your own life come into your head? Once again, how might your classmates’ internal images and associations with the word *cathedral* differ from yours?

3. Now reread the poem and consider the lines “Not the sound your friends know or the sound of a tape played back / but your voice / caught in the dark cathedral of your skull.” What do you think Lux means by the metaphor “dark cathedral of your skull”? What seems important about his choice of the word *cathedral* (rather than, say, *house* or *cave* or *gymnasium* or *mansion*)? How does *skull* work (rather than *mind* or *brain* or *head*)? Freewriting for several minutes, create your interpretation of “dark cathedral of the skull.”

4. Finally, reflect for a moment about your thinking processes in trying to interpret “cathedral of the skull.” Did you go back and reread the poem, looking for how this line fits other lines of the poem? Did you explore further your own ideas about cathedrals and skull? See if you can catch yourself in the act of interacting with the text—or actively constructing meaning.
Academic Writing Review

Remember these items as you edit your essay. They can make a big difference. I hope this sort of things helps. It’s incomplete, but it’s a start.

Think of the purpose of your paper, and of how each paragraph helps you fulfill it. As I mentioned elsewhere, the essays in the book aren’t pure models for the academic writing we will be doing. What we write should look more solid, even if it is less flashy. You’ll need to cite details and quickly follow up on their meanings through strong interpretation of the cited material. Topic sentences and transitions are key elements as well.

Thesis/Introduction

- Set up your thesis; it’s best to place it near/at the end of the introduction.
- Two-part introductions or other types of unconventional introductions tend not to work. Why? The writer tends not to do the jobs of the introduction. These include previewing the rest of the essay, setting up the thesis (and showing other sides to the point you’re trying to prove).
- Make sure your introduction promises what you’ll do. (Don’t say “In this essay I’ll. . .” or “First, I’ll discuss,” though. Just go ahead and start previewing the paper.)
- Avoid using “I” as much as possible.
- “Don’t use don’t.” Avoid contractions—as I haven’t in this posting!
- “Oh, I almost forgot.” Be careful of the formal writing voice you need to use. Don’t sound chatty. I want you to write more formally than you are in your postings.

Thesis Checklist

With the thesis statement, keep the following questions in mind. They might work for most academic writing. Get good at asking follow-up questions of your own so that you can edit your work.

- Is it a statement?
- Is it a complex sentence? (Most good thesis statements provide an overview of what you’ll go into. Therefore, most good thesis statements need to be complex sentences.)
- Does it take into account your 2-3 main reasons? (These are usually your body paragraph topics, right?)
- Does it take different sides into account? You want to appear fair, and the thesis is a great place for you to frame the merits and weak points of contending sides.
- Where will you locate this statement? Usually, though not always, we put the thesis either at the end of the introduction, or near the end. This allows us to set up the thesis carefully. Your introduction should take care to preview what you’ll get into in the body paragraphs, just as the conclusion reviews what you did.

Paragraphing

- Starting/ending paragraphs with quotes is often a warning sign. Why is that?
- When editing, check for strong topic sentences. Are they there? (Go a step further: did your
major topics make it into the introduction as preview material, and into the conclusion as review?
○ Citing properly matters. If readers are wondering where a source begins or ends, they are not attending to the content you chose to cite. Their job of appreciating what you brought to the essay is made impossible by citing problems.
○ Do interpret between quotes. Avoid stacking two or three quotes. I’m more interested in what you have to write about the quotes than what’s in the quotes.
○ Fix the problems with Smart Quotes. (See that mini-lecture in Module 1.)
○ Are your paragraphs connected directly to the thesis? How? (Is the connection clear enough?)
○ End paragraphs well. (Consider transitions as well as restatement of topic sentence.)

Interpretation

Perhaps the biggest frustration is that many of you include great quotes. They’re promising, they’re useful, they’re. . . sitting there! Use the words in the quote. Get readers to see their meaning. If you aren’t doing some work at this level, then you aren’t interpreting. Good readers are waiting for you to prove your points through close reading of the text. (Sell us on what the words mean. That takes some time.)

Conclusion

• Lack of a conclusion will seriously affect your readers’ reactions to the essay (and thus, your grade).
• I value strong conclusions that restate your points and remind readers about how you proved your claim(s).
• Do not add new information to the conclusion.
• Restate your thesis at a strategic point. Otherwise, readers will not remember your work soon afterwards—or a week from now.
• Be detailed: this is where you remind us of what you did. Don’t
• write two or three sentences and “be done with it.”
How to Read Like a Writer
by Mike Bunn

In 1997, I was a recent college graduate living in London for six months and working at the Palace Theatre owned by Andrew Lloyd Webber. The Palace was a beautiful red brick, four-story theatre in the heart of London’s famous West End, and eight times a week it housed a three-hour performance of the musical *Les Miserables*. Because of antiquated fire-safety laws, every theatre in the city was required to have a certain number of staff members inside watching the performance in case of an emergency.

My job (in addition to wearing a red tuxedo jacket) was to sit inside the dark theater with the patrons and make sure nothing went wrong. It didn’t seem to matter to my supervisor that I had no training in security and no idea where we kept the fire extinguishers. I was pretty sure that if there was any trouble I’d be running down the back stairs, leaving the patrons to fend for themselves. I had no intention of dying in a bright red tuxedo.

There was a Red Coat stationed on each of the theater’s four floors, and we all passed the time by sitting quietly in the back, reading books with tiny flashlights. It’s not easy trying to read in the dim light of a theatre—flashlight or no flashlight—and it’s even tougher with shrieks and shouts and gunshots coming from the stage. I had to focus intently on each and every word, often rereading a single sentence several times. Sometimes I got distracted and had to re-read entire paragraphs. As I struggled to read in this environment, I began to realize that the way I was reading—one word at a time—was exactly the same way that the author had written the text. I realized writing is a word-by-word, sentence-by-sentence process. The intense concentration required to read in the theater helped me recognize some of the interesting ways that authors string words into phrases into paragraphs into entire books.

I came to realize that all writing consists of a series of choices.

I was an English major in college, but I don’t think I ever thought much about reading. I read all the time. I read for my classes and on the computer and sometimes for fun, but I never really thought about the important connections between reading and writing, and how reading in a particular way could also make me a better writer.

What Does It Mean to Read Like a Writer?

When you Read Like a Writer (RLW) you work to identify some of the choices the author made so that you can better understand how such choices might arise in your own writing. The idea is to carefully examine the things you read, looking at the writerly techniques in the text in order to decide if you might want to adopt similar (or the same) techniques in your writing.

You are reading to learn about writing.

Instead of reading for content or to better understand the ideas in the writing (which you will automatically do to some degree anyway), you are trying to understand how the piece of writing was...
put together by the author and what you can learn about writing by reading a particular text. As you read in this way, you think about how the choices the author made and the techniques that he/she used are influencing your own responses as a reader. What is it about the way this text is written that makes you feel and respond the way you do?

The goal as you read like a writer is to locate what you believe are the most important writerly choices represented in the text—choices as large as the overall structure or as small as a single word used only once—to consider the effect of those choices on potential readers (including yourself). Then you can go one step further and imagine what different choices the author might have made instead, and what effect those different choices would have on readers.

Say you’re reading an essay in class that begins with a short quote from President Barack Obama about the war in Iraq. As a writer, what do you think of this technique? Do you think it is effective to begin the essay with a quote? What if the essay began with a quote from someone else? What if it was a much longer quote from President Obama, or a quote from the President about something other than the war?

And here is where we get to the most important part: Would you want to try this technique in your own writing?

Would you want to start your own essay with a quote? Do you think it would be effective to begin your essay with a quote from President Obama? What about a quote from someone else? You could make yourself a list. What are the advantages and disadvantages of starting with a quote? What about the advantages and disadvantages of starting with a quote from the President? How would other readers respond to this technique? Would certain readers (say Democrats or liberals) appreciate an essay that started with a quote from President Obama better than other readers (say Republicans or conservatives)? What would be the advantages and disadvantages of starting with a quote from a less divisive person? What about starting with a quote from someone more divisive?

The goal is to carefully consider the choices the author made and the techniques that he or she used, and then decide whether you want to make those same choices or use those same techniques in your own writing. Author and professor Wendy Bishop explains how her reading process changed when she began to read like a writer:

It wasn’t until I claimed the sentence as my area of desire, interest, and expertise—until I wanted to be a writer writing better—that I had to look underneath my initial readings . . . I started asking, how—how did the writer get me to feel, how did the writer say something so that it remains in my memory when many other things too easily fall out, how did the writer communicate his/her intentions about genre, about irony? (119–20)

Bishop moved from simply reporting her personal reactions to the things she read to attempting to uncover how the author led her (and other readers) to have those reactions. This effort to uncover how authors build texts is what makes Reading Like a Writer so useful for student writers.

**How Is RLW Different from “Normal” Reading?**

Most of the time we read for information. We read a recipe to learn how to bake lasagna. We read the sports page to see if our school won the game, Facebook to see who has commented on our status update, a history book to learn about the Vietnam War, and the syllabus to see when the next writing
assignment is due. Reading Like a Writer asks for something very different.

In 1940, a famous poet and critic named Allen Tate discussed two different ways of reading:

There are many ways to read, but generally speaking there are two ways. They correspond to the two ways in which we may be interested in a piece of architecture. If the building has Corinthian columns, we can trace the origin and development of Corinthian columns; we are interested as historians. But if we are interested as architects, we may or may not know about the history of the Corinthian style; we must, however, know all about the construction of the building, down to the last nail or peg in the beams. We have got to know this if we are going to put up buildings ourselves. (506)

While I don’t know anything about Corinthian columns (and doubt that I will ever want to know anything about Corinthian columns), Allen Tate’s metaphor of reading as if you were an architect is a great way to think about RLW. When you read like a writer, you are trying to figure out how the text you are reading was constructed so that you learn how to “build” one for yourself. Author David Jauss makes a similar comparison when he writes that “reading won’t help you much unless you learn to read like a writer. You must look at a book the way a carpenter looks at a house someone else built, examining the details in order to see how it was made” (64).

Perhaps I should change the name and call this Reading Like an Architect, or Reading Like a Carpenter. In a way those names make perfect sense. You are reading to see how something was constructed so that you can construct something similar yourself.

**Why Learn to Read Like a Writer?**

For most college students RLW is a new way to read, and it can be difficult to learn at first. Making things even more difficult is that your college writing instructor may expect you to read this way for class but never actually teach you how to do it. He or she may not even tell you that you’re supposed to read this way. This is because most writing instructors are so focused on teaching writing that they forget to show students how they want them to read.

That’s what this essay is for.

In addition to the fact that your college writing instructor may expect you to read like a writer, this kind of reading is also one of the very best ways to learn how to write well. Reading like a writer can help you understand how the process of writing is a series of making choices, and in doing so, can help you recognize important decisions you might face and techniques you might want to use when working on your own writing. Reading this way becomes an opportunity to think and learn about writing.

Charles Moran, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts, urges us to read like writers because:

When we read like writers we understand and participate in the writing. We see the choices the writer has made, and we see how the writer has coped with the consequences of those choices . . . We “see” what the writer is doing because we read as writers; we see because we have written ourselves and know the territory, know the feel of it, know some of the moves ourselves. (61)

You are already an author, and that means you have a built-in advantage when reading like a writer. All
of your previous writing experiences—inside the classroom and out—can contribute to your success with RLW. Because you “have written” things yourself, just as Moran suggests, you are better able to “see” the choices that the author is making in the texts that you read. This in turn helps you to think about whether you want to make some of those same choices in your own writing, and what the consequences might be for your readers if you do.

**What Are Some Questions to Ask Before You Start Reading?**

As I sat down to work on this essay, I contacted a few of my former students to ask what advice they would give to college students regarding how to read effectively in the writing classroom and also to get their thoughts on RLW. Throughout the rest of the essay I’d like to share some of their insights and suggestions; after all, who is better qualified to help you learn what you need to know about reading in college writing courses than students who recently took those courses themselves?

One of the things that several students mentioned to do first, before you even start reading, is to consider the context surrounding both the assignment and the text you’re reading. As one former student, Alison, states: “The reading I did in college asked me to go above and beyond, not only in breadth of subject matter, but in depth, with regards to informed analysis and background information on context.” Alison was asked to think about some of the factors that went into the creation of the text, as well as some of the factors influencing her own experience of reading—taken together these constitute the context of reading. Another former student, Jamie, suggests that students “learn about the historical context of the writings” they will read for class. Writing professor Richard Straub puts it this way: “You’re not going to just read a text. You’re going to read a text within a certain context, a set of circumstances . . . It’s one kind of writing or another, designed for one audience and purpose or another” (138).

Among the contextual factors you’ll want to consider before you even start reading are: Do you

- know the author’s purpose for this piece of writing?
- Do you know who the intended audience is for this piece of writing?

It may be that you need to start reading before you can answer these first two questions, but it’s worth trying to answer them before you start. For example, if you know at the outset that the author is trying to reach a very specific group of readers, then his or her writerly techniques may seem more or less effective than if he/she was trying to reach a more general audience. Similarly—returning to our earlier example of beginning an essay with a quote from President Obama about the war in Iraq—if you know that the author’s purpose is to address some of the dangers and drawbacks of warfare, this may be a very effective opening. If the purpose is to encourage Americans to wear sunscreen while at the beach this opening makes no sense at all. One former student, Lola, explained that most of her reading assignments in college writing classes were designed “to provoke analysis and criticisms into the style, structure, and purpose of the writing itself.”

**In What Genre Is This Written?**

Another important thing to consider before reading is the genre of the text. Genre means a few different things in college English classes, but it’s most often used to indicate the type of writing: a poem, a newspaper article, an essay, a short story, a novel, a legal brief, an instruction manual, etc. Because the conventions for each genre can be very different (who ever heard of a 900-page newspaper article?),
techniques that are effective for one genre may not work well in another. Many readers expect poems and pop songs to rhyme, for example, but might react negatively to a legal brief or instruction manual that did so. Another former student, Mike, comments on how important the genre of the text can be for reading:

I think a lot of the way I read, of course, depends on the type of text I’m reading. If I’m reading philosophy, I always look for signaling words (however, therefore, furthermore, despite) indicating the direction of the argument . . . when I read fiction or creative nonfiction, I look for how the author inserts dialogue or character sketches within narration or environmental observation. After reading To the Lighthouse [sic] last semester, I have noticed how much more attentive I’ve become to the types of narration (omniscient, impersonal, psychological, realistic, etc.), and how these different approaches are utilized to achieve an author’s overall effect.

Although Mike specifically mentions what he looked for while reading a published novel, one of the great things about RLW is that it can be used equally well with either published or student-produced writing.

Is This a Published or a Student-Produced Piece of Writing?

As you read both kinds of texts you can locate the choices the author made and imagine the different decisions that he/she might have made. While it might seem a little weird at first to imagine how published texts could be written differently—after all, they were good enough to be published—remember that all writing can be improved. Scholar Nancy Walker believes that it’s important for students to read published work using RLW because “the work ceases to be a mere artifact, a stone tablet, and becomes instead a living utterance with immediacy and texture. It could have been better or worse than it is had the author made different choices” (36). As Walker suggests, it’s worth thinking about how the published text would be different—maybe even better—if the author had made different choices in the writing because you may be faced with similar choices in your own work.

Is This the Kind of Writing You Will Be Assigned to Write Yourself?

Knowing ahead of time what kind of writing assignments you will be asked to complete can really help you to read like a writer. It’s probably impossible (and definitely too time consuming) to identify all of the choices the author made and all techniques an author used, so it’s important to prioritize while reading. Knowing what you’ll be writing yourself can help you prioritize. It may be the case that your instructor has assigned the text you’re reading to serve as model for the kind of writing you’ll be doing later. Jessie, a former student, writes, “In college writing classes, we knew we were reading for a purpose—to influence or inspire our own work. The reading that I have done in college writing courses has always been really specific to a certain type of writing, and it allows me to focus and experiment on that specific style in depth and without distraction.”

If the text you’re reading is a model of a particular style of writing—for example, highly-emotional or humorous—RLW is particularly helpful because you can look at a piece you’re reading and think about whether you want to adopt a similar style in your own writing. You might realize that the author is trying to arouse sympathy in readers and examine what techniques he/she uses to do this; then you can decide whether these techniques might work well in your own writing. You might notice that the author keeps including jokes or funny stories and think about whether you want to include them in your
What Are Questions to Ask As You Are Reading?

It is helpful to continue to ask yourself questions as you read like a writer. As you’re first learning to read in this new way, you may want to have a set of questions written or typed out in front of you that you can refer to while reading. Eventually—after plenty of practice—you will start to ask certain questions and locate certain things in the text almost automatically. Remember, for most students this is a new way of reading, and you’ll have to train yourself to do it well. Also keep in mind that you’re reading to understand how the text was written—how the house was built—more than you’re trying to determine the meaning of the things you read or assess whether the texts are good or bad.

First, return to two of the same questions I suggested that you consider before reading: What is the

- author’s purpose for this piece of writing?
- Who is the intended audience?

Think about these two questions again as you read. It may be that you couldn’t really answer them before, or that your ideas will change while reading. Knowing why the piece was written and who it’s for can help explain why the author might have made certain choices or used particular techniques in the writing, and you can assess those choices and techniques based in part on how effective they are in fulfilling that purpose and/or reaching the intended audience.

Beyond these initial two questions, there is an almost endless list of questions you might ask regarding writing choices and techniques. Here are some of the questions that one former student, Clare, asks herself:

When reading I tend to be asking myself a million questions. If I were writing this, where would I go with the story? If the author goes in a different direction (as they so often do) from what I am thinking, I will ask myself, why did they do this? What are they telling me?

Clare tries to figure out why the author might have made a move in the writing that she hadn’t anticipated, but even more importantly, she asks herself what she would do if she were the author. Reading the text becomes an opportunity for Clare to think about her own role as an author.

Here are some additional examples of the kinds of questions you might ask yourself as you read:

- How effective is the language the author uses? Is it too formal? Too informal? Perfectly appropriate?

Depending on the subject matter and the intended audience, it may make sense to be more or less formal in terms of language. As you begin reading, you can ask yourself whether the word choice and tone/language of the writing seem appropriate.

- What kinds of evidence does the author use to support his/her claims? Does he/she use statistics? Quotes from famous people? Personal anecdotes or personal stories? Does he/she cite books or articles?
- How appropriate or effective is this evidence? Would a different type of evidence, or some combination of evidence, be more effective?
To some extent the kinds of questions you ask should be determined by the genre of writing you are reading. For example, it’s probably worth examining the evidence that the author uses to support his/ her claims if you’re reading an opinion column, but less important if you’re reading a short story. An opinion column is often intended to convince readers of something, so the kinds of evidence used are often very important. A short story may be intended to convince readers of something, sometimes, but probably not in the same way. A short story rarely includes claims or evidence in the way that we usually think about them.

- Are there places in the writing that you find confusing? What about the writing in those places makes it unclear or confusing?

It’s pretty normal to get confused in places while reading, especially while reading for class, so it can be helpful to look closely at the writing to try and get a sense of exactly what tripped you up. This way you can learn to avoid those same problems in your own writing.

- How does the author move from one idea to another in the writing? Are the transitions between the ideas effective? How else might he/she have transitioned between ideas instead?

Notice that in these questions I am encouraging you to question whether aspects of the writing are appropriate and effective in addition to deciding whether you liked or disliked them. You want to imagine how other readers might respond to the writing and the techniques you’ve identified. Deciding whether you liked or disliked something is only about you; considering whether a technique is appropriate or effective lets you contemplate what the author might have been trying to do and to decide whether a majority of readers would find the move successful. This is important because it’s the same thing you should be thinking about while you are writing: how will readers respond to this technique I am using, to this sentence, to this word? As you read, ask yourself what the author is doing at each step of the way, and then consider whether the same choice or technique might work in your own writing.

**What Should You Be Writing As You Are Reading?**

The most common suggestion made by former students—mentioned by every single one of them—was to mark up the text, make comments in the margins, and write yourself notes and summaries both during and after reading. Often the notes students took while reading became ideas or material for the students to use in their own papers. It’s important to read with a pen or highlighter in your hand so that you can mark—right on the text—all those spots where you identify an interesting choice the author has made or a writerly technique you might want to use. One thing that I like to do is to highlight and underline the passage in the text itself, and then try to answer the following three questions on my notepad:

- What is the technique the author is using here? Is this technique effective?
- What would be the advantages and disadvantages if I tried this same technique in my writing?

By utilizing this same process of highlighting and note taking, you’ll end up with a useful list of specific techniques to have at your disposal when it comes time to begin your own writing.
What Does RLW Look Like in Action?

Let’s go back to the opening paragraph of this essay and spend some time reading like writers as a way to get more comfortable with the process:

In 1997, I was a recent college graduate living in London for six months and working at the Palace Theatre owned by Andrew Lloyd Webber. The Palace was a beautiful red brick, four-story theatre in the heart of London’s famous West End, and eight times a week it housed a three-hour performance of the musical Les Miserables. Because of antiquated fire-safety laws, every theatre in the city was required to have a certain number of staff members inside watching the performance in case of an emergency.

Let’s begin with those questions I encouraged you to try to answer before you start reading. (I realize we’re cheating a little bit in this case since you’ve already read most of this essay, but this is just practice. When doing this on your own, you should attempt to answer these questions before reading, and then return to them as you read to develop your answers.)

- Do you know the author’s purpose for this piece of writing? I hope the purpose is clear by now; if it isn’t, I’m doing a pretty lousy job of explaining how and why you might read like a writer.
- Do you know who the intended audience is? Again, I hope that you know this one by now. What about the genre? Is this an essay? An article? What would you call it?
- You know that it’s published and not student writing. How does this influence your expectations for what you will read?
- Are you going to be asked to write something like this yourself? Probably not in your college writing class, but you can still use RLW to learn about writerly techniques that you might want to use in whatever you do end up writing.

Now ask yourself questions as you read.

In 1997, I was a recent college graduate living in London for six months and working at the Palace Theatre owned by Andrew Lloyd Webber. The Palace was a beautiful red brick, four-story theatre in the heart of London’s famous West End, and eight times a week it housed a three-hour performance of the musical Les Miserables. Because of antiquated fire-safety laws, every theatre in the city was required to have a certain number of staff members inside watching the performance in case of an emergency.

Since this paragraph is the very first one, it makes sense to think about how it introduces readers to the essay. What technique(s) does the author use to begin the text? This is a personal story about his time working in London. What else do you notice as you read over this passage? Is the passage vague or specific about where he worked? You know that the author worked in a famous part of London in a beautiful theater owned by a well-known composer. Are these details important? How different would this opening be if instead I had written:

In 1997, I was living in London and working at a theatre that showed Les Miserables.

This is certainly shorter, and some of you may prefer this version. It’s quick. To the point. But what (if anything) is lost by eliminating so much of the detail? I chose to include each of the details that the revised sentence omits, so it’s worth considering why. Why did I mention where the theater was
located? Why did I explain that I was living in London right after finishing college? Does it matter that it was after college? What effect might I have hoped the inclusion of these details would have on readers? Is this reference to college an attempt to connect with my audience of college students? Am I trying to establish my credibility as an author by announcing that I went to college? Why might I want the readers to know that this was a theater owned by Andrew Lloyd Weber? Do you think I am just trying to mention a famous name that readers will recognize? Will Andrew Lloyd Weber figure prominently in the rest of the essay?

These are all reasonable questions to ask. They are not necessarily the right questions to ask because there are no right questions. They certainly aren’t the only questions you could ask, either. The goal is to train yourself to formulate questions as you read based on whatever you notice in the text. Your own reactions to what you’re reading will help determine the kinds of questions to ask.

Now take a broader perspective. I begin this essay—an essay about reading—by talking about my job in a theater in London. Why? Doesn’t this seem like an odd way to begin an essay about reading? If you read on a little further (feel free to scan back up at the top of this essay) you learn in the third full paragraph what the connection is between working in the theater and reading like a writer, but why include this information at all? What does this story add to the essay? Is it worth the space it takes up?

Think about what effect presenting this personal information might have on readers. Does it make it feel like a real person, some “ordinary guy,” is talking to you? Does it draw you into the essay and make you want to keep reading?

What about the language I use? Is it formal or more informal? This is a time when you can really narrow your focus and look at particular words:

Because of antiquated fire-safety laws, every theatre in the city was required to have a certain number of staff members inside watching the performance in case of an emergency.

What is the effect of using the word “antiquated” to describe the fire safety laws? It certainly projects a negative impression; if the laws are described as antiquated it means I view them as old-fashioned or obsolete. This is a fairly uncommon word, so it stands out, drawing attention to my choice in using it. The word also sounds quite formal. Am I formal in the rest of this sentence?

I use the word “performance” when I just as easily could have written “show.” For that matter, I could have written “old” instead of “antiquated.” You can proceed like this throughout the sentence, thinking about alternative choices I could have made and what the effect would be. Instead of “staff members” I could have written “employees” or just “workers.” Notice the difference if the sentence had been written:

Because of old fire-safety laws, every theatre in the city was required to have a certain number of workers inside watching the show in case of an emergency.

Which version is more likely to appeal to readers? You can try to answer this question by thinking about the advantages and disadvantages of using formal language. When would you want to use formal language in your writing and when would it make more sense to be more conversational?

As you can see from discussing just this one paragraph, you could ask questions about the text forever. Luckily, you don’t have to. As you continue reading like a writer, you’ll learn to notice techniques that
seem new and pay less attention to the ones you’ve thought about before. The more you practice the quicker the process becomes until you’re reading like a writer almost automatically.

I want to end this essay by sharing one more set of comments by my former student, Lola, this time about what it means to her to read like a writer:

    Reading as a writer would compel me to question what might have brought the author to make these decisions, and then decide what worked and what didn’t. What could have made that chapter better or easier to understand? How can I make sure I include some of the good attributes of this writing style into my own? How can I take aspects that I feel the writer failed at and make sure not to make the same mistakes in my writing?

Questioning why the author made certain decisions. Considering what techniques could have made the text better. Deciding how to include the best attributes of what you read in your own writing. This is what Reading Like a Writer is all about. Are you ready to start reading?

Discussion

1. How is “Reading Like a Writer” similar to and/or different from the way(s) you read for other classes?
2. What kinds of choices do you make as a writer that readers might identify in your written work?
3. Is there anything you notice in this essay that you might like to try in your own writing? What is that technique or strategy? When do you plan to try using it?
4. What are some of the different ways that you can learn about the context of a text before you begin reading it?

Works Cited


Not Taking Sides is Like the Beetlejuice Waiting Room Scene.

. . Access Link at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ei-2xTsyL8w

It is important that we recognize the benefits and limitations of methodology. Likely, you know your major discipline’s approaches well. There are ways of being recognized or not. For instance, in Jeopardy contests, one has to phrase the answer in the form of a question. In discussion postings, many instructors require the post subject to be in sentence form. In Fast Times at Ridgemont High, Jeff Spicoli, the surfer doesn’t recognize his little brother: “Curtis, you know I don’t hear you unless you knock…” (Heckerling). In science, hypotheses have to be provable. In academic writing, thesis claims must be both provable and arguable.

I’m reminded of the notion of Purgatory, an invention of Dante in his La Divina Commedia (Divine Comedy). This gets played up famously in Beetlejuice and its waiting room scene:

What’s interesting is that this echoes Dante, who puts people who failed to distinguish themselves into Hell. For Dante’s Italians, not choosing was worse than choosing an opposite side to one’s preferred side. Strangely enough, we are often more knowledgeable of our opponents—more tolerant of them, even—than of those who never choose. He even puts the neutral angels into Hell. In that era (1300 Florence), he even put living people into Hell, claiming that these people were so bad that demons inhabited their bodies and they were already in hell.

So these ideas can receive dogmatic answers. They get recognized or not, but over time they accrete meaning, slow down, and become concrete. (No Dogma references necessary. . .)

What I find interesting is that we’re often struggling with the miniscule rules of MLA style in the same way.

As with science, though, we can essentialize this a bit: We are always already entering ongoing conversations. We do have to be for or against something. Likely ways of being against something are going to lead to tone issues and assumptions about audience agreement.

As the Beetlejuice move states, “Take a number!” and “It’s showtime!” (Burton).
Modes of Exposition

Exposition

A type of essay or composition offering information on a topic, concept, process, or issue. Logic, facts, and examples support a thesis or main claim.

Example: The United States military is an all-volunteer force consisting of five main branches. The divisions are the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and the Coast Guard.

Narration

This storytelling composition might inform, entertain, or even instruct through example. Narration uses sensory description but may also use figurative language to add to the intensity of the story.

Example: My father was drafted into the United States Army in May of 1969. He told me often of his sadness at receiving the draft notice. But he also felt a sense of pride in getting a chance to serve his country.

Description

A type of composition giving the reader details about an object, person, or experience. It can also describe a topic or the particular components of a concept.

Example: The diving board at the old Jonesberg city pool was ancient and sad. The rust that spotted the steel base was flaking and fell into the pool like dead skin.

Argumentation

This essay type goes beyond mere informative writing. The writer must take a stand on a topic or thesis and attempt to sway the reader to agree with the claim. Logic, examples, and rhetorical devices support the writer’s stance.

Example: Steinbeck used symbolism to great effect in the Grapes of Wrath. Grapes are a recurring motif in the story and they have several symbolic meanings.

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Reading to Write Effectively

Reading to Write Effectively: Why you Need a Reading Strategy before Writing Anything

Given all of the reading and writing that we are expected to accomplish as college/university students, it’s important to be as efficient as possible when committing our time to these responsibilities. Three of the most important suggestions for approaching reading and, therefore, writing, efficiently are as follows:

read with a pen in hand; don’t expect yourself to remember key concepts/ideas

most of us can’t remember everything that we’ve read and then call it to memory when we’re writing. Therefore, reading with a pen in hand prepares you to circle/underline key concepts/ideas in the text you’re reading. This creates a way of “tracing” key concepts/ideas throughout the text so that when it’s time to recall what you’ve read and use it to guide your writing, it will be much easier to condense the entire text into a unique, organized, written response. If you don’t want to write in the text that you’re reading, open a blank Word document for keeping track of key concepts/ideas (and page numbers).

write while reading because it’s an informal way of “conversing with” the author of the text (i.e. learning about how your writing can contribute something useful to “the conversation” of your resources)

in addition to circling/underlining key concepts/ideas throughout your reading process, it may also be helpful to keep a list of questions, connections with other texts/assignments/disciplines, etc. because this list can easily translate into “official” writing. For instance, even if your teacher isn’t requiring a written assignment in response to the reading assignment, if you keep a working document with questions, connections, etc. regarding the reading assignment, you will likely be much better prepared to discuss the reading, not to mention that your notations can easily serve in the short-term as a Twitter/Facebook post.

develop research questions/research key words while reading; most of the time, it’s fairly easy to identify research key words/ create unique research questions while reading actively

the notations you keep in the texts you’re reading can help to prevent the frustration of figuring out “what to write about” when it comes time to interpret the reading assignments into unique written work. They give you something to start with – either in the sense that you can extend the ideas you have already written down, or challenge them by researching what’s missing … either way, you have something to work with, which helps to alleviate some of the anxiety of staring at a blank page.

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How to Write With Style

In the anthology *How To Use The Power of the Printed Word*, brilliant author Kurt Vonnegut shares eight tips on how to write with style:

**Find a Subject You Care About**

Find a subject you care about and which you in your heart feel others should care about. It is this genuine caring, and not your games with language, which will be the most compelling and seductive element in your style.

I am not urging you to write a novel, by the way — although I would not be sorry if you wrote one, provided you genuinely cared about something. A petition to the mayor about a pothole in front of your house or a love letter to the girl next door will do.

**Do Not Ramble, Though**

I won’t ramble on about that.

**Keep It Simple**

As for your use of language: Remember that two great masters of language, William Shakespeare and James Joyce, wrote sentences which were almost childlike when their subjects were most profound. ‘To be or not to be?’ asks Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The longest word is three letters long. Joyce, when he was frisky, could put together a sentence as intricate and as glittering as a necklace for Cleopatra, but my favorite sentence in his short story ‘Eveline’ is just this one: ‘She was tired.’ At that point in the story, no other words could break the heart of a reader as those three words do.

Simplicity of language is not only reputable, but perhaps even sacred. The Bible opens with a sentence well within the writing skills of a lively fourteen-year-old: “In the beginning God created the heaven and earth.”

**Have the Guts to Cut**

It may be that you, too, are capable of making necklaces for Cleopatra, so to speak. But your eloquence should be the servant of the ideas in your head. Your rule might be this: If a sentence, no matter how excellent, does not illuminate your subject in some new and useful way, scratch it out.

**Sound like Yourself**

The writing style which is most natural for you is bound to echo the speech you heard when a child. English was the novelist Joseph Conrad’s third language, and much that seems piquant in his use of English was no doubt colored by his first language, which was Polish. And lucky indeed is the writer...
who has grown up in Ireland, for the English spoken there is so amusing and musical. I myself grew up in Indianapolis, where common speech sounds like a band saw cutting galvanized tin, and employs a vocabulary as unornamental as a monkey wrench.

In some of the more remote hollows of Appalachia, children still grow up hearing songs and locutions of Elizabethan times. Yes, and many Americans grow up hearing a language other than English, or an English dialect a majority of Americans cannot understand.

All these varieties of speech are beautiful, just as the varieties of butterflies are beautiful. No matter what your first language, you should treasure it all your life. If it happens not to be standard English, and if it shows itself when you write standard English, the result is usually delightful, like a very pretty girl with one eye that is green and one that is blue.

I myself find that I trust my own writing most, and others seem to trust it most, too, when I sound most like a person from Indianapolis, which is what I am. What alternatives do I have? The one most vehemently recommended by teachers has no doubt been pressed on you, as well: to write like cultivated Englishmen of a century or more ago.

**Say What You Mean to Say**

I used to be exasperated by such teachers, but am no more. I understand now that all those antique essays and stories with which I was to compare my own work were not magnificent for their datedness or foreignness, but for saying precisely what their authors meant them to say. My teachers wished me to write accurately, always selecting the most effective words, and relating the words to one another unambiguously, rigidly, like parts of a machine. The teachers did not want to turn me into an Englishman after all. They hoped that I would become understandable — and therefore understood. And there went my dream of doing with words what Pablo Picasso did with paint or what any number of jazz idols did with music. If I broke all the rules of punctuation, had words mean whatever I wanted them to mean, and strung them together higgledly-piggledy, I would simply not be understood. So you, too, had better avoid Picasso-style or jazz-style writing if you have something worth saying and wish to be understood.

Readers want our pages to look very much like pages they have seen before. Why? This is because they themselves have a tough job to do, and they need all the help they can get from us.

**Pity the Readers**

Readers have to identify thousands of little marks on paper, and make sense of them immediately. They have to read, an art so difficult that most people don’t really master it even after having studied it all through grade school and high school — twelve long years.

So this discussion must finally acknowledge that our stylistic options as writers are neither numerous nor glamorous, since our readers are bound to be such imperfect artists. Our audience requires us to be sympathetic and patient teachers, ever willing to simplify and clarify, whereas we would rather soar high above the crowd, singing likenightingales.

That is the bad news. The good news is that we Americans are governed under a unique constitution, which allows us to write whatever we please without fear of punishment. So the most meaningful aspect
of our styles, which is what we choose to write about, is utterly unlimited.

**For Really Detailed Advice**

For a discussion of literary style in a narrower sense, a more technical sense, I commend to your attention *The Elements of Style*, by Strunk, Jr., and E. B. White. E. B. White is, of course, one of the most admirable literary stylists this country has so far produced.

You should realize, too, that no one would care how well or badly Mr. White expressed himself if he did not have perfectly enchanting things to say.

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- Kurt Vonnegut’s 8 Rules for Writing With Style. **Authored by:** Kurt Vonnegut and David Pescovitz. **Provided by:** BoingBoing. **Located at:** http://boingboing.net/2015/09/17/kurt-vonneguts-8-rules-for-w.html. **License:** *CC BY-NC-SA: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike*
Creating an Effective Style

Learning Objectives

- Discuss ways to make the style more effective and compelling.
- Discuss how to fix common mistakes in editing.
- Provide two contrasting example essays for review.

Once you’ve adequately explored your subject and laid out your analysis with an effective structure, you can focus more deliberately on the style. Though content and style are difficult to separate, the focus of our attention tends to shift in later drafts from discovering new ideas to considering more effective ways to convey them. The process, however, is not linear but recursive—because a thorough analysis leads to clarity of expression and clarity of expression will in turn lead to a more thorough analysis.

Often when you can find a more precise term, it will give you new insights on the entire section and lead to a more sophisticated approach in general.

Finding the Most Vivid Terms

For this reason, I recommend that after you’ve finished writing a draft of your essay go back and underline all the vague and general terms to see if you can replace them with more precise diction, words that are clear and specific. Especially look out for the “s” word, and no, I do not mean the one that comes to almost everyone’s lips when they look in the rear view mirror and see flashing police lights. I mean “society.” By itself it can mean anything—the entire world, the specific part of the country you live in, the people who make the rules, the counter culture that resists the people who make the rules, to name just a few. If you can specify which “society” you are referring to, you will not only clarify your analysis but also discover new insights concerning the significance of your perspective to a specific group. And also try to avoid all the variations of society that do not provide additional clarity, such as: “in today’s society” or “in today’s modern complex industrial society.”

Consider also looking out for these vague terms and phrases: “The Government.” Try to specify if this term refers to state, local, or federal representatives, the people who vote them in, or to those who get paid through tax dollars, such as public school teachers, policeman, and armed service personal. “Since the beginning of time.” Try to specify when something actually begins. Personal computers, for instance, have not been around since the beginning of time, as one of my students wrote, but only since the late 1970s. “All people want to have…” No matter how you finish that sentence, you probably won’t discover something that all people want to have. Again, specify which group of people and why they want to have it. You should also be on the lookout for words like, “stuff,” “things,” or “items,” if you can replace them with more concrete terms like, “scattered papers,” “empty oil cans,” or “half finished plates of food.”

Give the same care and attention to your choice of verbs. You should especially avoid overusing the passive voice, in which the subject of the sentence does not perform the action as in “Tina was asked to go to the prom by Jake.” Usually the active voice sounds more vivid and more compelling, “Jake asked Tina to go to the prom.” And it would be even better if you could replace the verb “asked” with one that
gives a more specific account of the action: “Jake begged Tina to go to the Prom.” But don’t feel the need to eliminate
the passive voice entirely. Sometimes you may not know who performed the action implied in the sentence, “my car
was scraped” or you don’t want to admit responsibility for your own actions, “mistakes were made.” Just make
certain that when you use a form of the verb “to be,” you do so for a reason and not in place of a verb that suggests a
more vivid account.

Avoiding Wordiness

In advising you to find more precise and compelling words, I do not mean that you should search your thesaurus to
find the longest and most complicated terms. Nothing makes students sound like they are trying too hard to impress
their teachers than when they use words that appear unnecessarily complicated, dated, or pretentious to make
the analysis seem more sophisticated. Though students often think that they impress their teachers by using the
most complex term, it usually leaves the opposite impression that you are spending too much time with the
thesaurus and not enough with the actual substance of the essay.

Along these lines, avoid the other common trick of adding unnecessary words just to lengthen the essay out to the
required number of pages. Instead always look for ways to state your point of view more succinctly. Sometimes you
can do this by using a term that implies several others. For instance, you do not need to write, “Sue is like those people
who always put off doing what they are supposed to do until much later than they should have done it in the first
place,” when you can simply say, “Sue procrastinates.”

Writing Compelling Sentences

Once your essay has a precise, natural diction, you can jazz it up even further by creating sentence variety. A series
of sentences of the same length and type tends to get hypnotic (in fact, hypnotists use rhythmical tones and repetitious
phrases to put people into trances). Your essay should “flow” in the sense that the ideas connect to each other, but not
in the sense that the style seems like listening to the waves of a lake lapping against the shore at steady intervals. A
style that commands attention seems more like a river that changes at every bend. To achieve this effect, try to
juxtapose sentences of various lengths and types. If you have a long sentence that is full of subordination and
coordination, moving through the complexities of a section of your analysis, then try to follow it up with a short one.
Like this.

An excellent way to achieve more variety, provide more coherence, and reduce wordiness is to combine some of the
sentences. Take the following series: I wanted some ice cream. There are ice cream shops downtown. I have to
drive to get to downtown. I don’t have time to drive downtown. I’ve been putting on weight lately. I
decided to eat a carrot. Carrots are healthier than ice cream. Even if these sentences were full of more
intriguing observations, we would have to struggle not to fall into a hypnotic trance while reading them. Consider
how much more engaging it is to read: I wanted some ice cream. But when I realized I had to drive all the way
downtown to get some, I decided to settle for a carrot instead, a much healthier choice for me anyway. I’ve
put on weight lately. The combination of short and long sentences keeps our attention by jolting us out of a
monotonous flow; the elimination of excess words keeps us from having to sort through the clutter; and the
coordination and subordination provides a sense of coherence to the previously scattered thoughts.
Editing

Once you have an effective structure and style, make sure to proofread your essay carefully. Try to imagine going out on a date, in which you took the time to work for the extra money to go to a nice restaurant and spent hours trying on outfits to look your best, but then when the food arrives, you dig into it with your hands, chew with your mouth open, and reach over to eat your partner’s food, too.

Sounds ridiculous, right? Then why do I often get papers from students who took the time to write engaging analyses but did not bother to eliminate similar distractions in editing etiquette? No matter how intelligently you express your point of view, no one will take your essay seriously if it is riddled with errors in punctuation, sentence structure, and spelling.

To avoid these problems, I recommend that when you finish your essay try reverse editing, a method in which you check the essay a sentence at a time backwards. In other words, read the last sentence first and work your way back to the first. This way you will not get so involved in the content that you overlook the problems with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. If you have trouble recognizing these problems, I suggest that you get a hold of a handbook and dictionary instead of relying on your computer to solve all the problems for you. For instance, spell check cannot catch all errors, especially when you use the wrong homonym, or when a typo transforms the word you intend into one that’s different, such as when you forget to type the “t” in “the” and it becomes “he.”

Review

To underscore all the advice I have given throughout this book, consider the ways that you might revise and edit the following piece entitled “Those Misleading Manhattan Friends” that I wrote as a parody of bad essay writing. While producing it, I had the joy of ignoring every piece of advice I’ve given throughout this book. It contains no developed analysis; a five paragraph essay structure; vague, repetitive, archaic, and inappropriate terms; monotonous sentences of the same type and length; errors in punctuation, parallelism, and logic; and oodles of misspellings that spell check will not catch. Before you attempt to revise it, you might want to first review the advice given throughout this chapter about transforming topic sentences into transitions, choosing appropriate diction, combining sentences for variety, and editing the finished draft by reading it a sentence at a time backwards.

Those Misleading Manhattan Friends

Television. According to Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, television is a system for transmitting images and sound into a receiver. Television influences how we think. As part of the media, it shows us ways to consider the ways we see the world. In the show Friends three major contradictions can be found that can be seen by the desecrating viewer. As this paper proceeds each of these contradictions will be made more clearer.

The first of these contradictions has to do with the economics of the major characters within the show Friends. Manhattan is an expensive place to live. It is expensive because the rents are very high there. My friend lives in Manhattan. My friend pays a lot for rent in Manhattan. My friend pays over 2,000 dollars a month for a studio apartment in Manhattan. My friend has a good job in Manhattan and still has difficulty making ends meet in such an expensive city as Manhattan. Ross is a teacher. He teaches at the University. Ross lives in a nice apartment. Teachers make very little money. Even University teachers make very little money. Phoebe is a masseuse. She gets paid per job. She lives in a nice
apartment. She makes 50 dollars per job. She is always at the coffee shop with her friends. How many jobs can she do in a week? Rents are just too high overall.

Another contradiction within the show *Friends* is there relationships. Ross and Rachel date each other. Ross and Rachel indubitably break up. This usually happens at the end of each season. They are still friends. I cannot be friends with anyone I break up with. My feckless girlfriend and I dated for six years. Then she changed 360 degrees into a different person. She brook my heart. I do not wish to talk to he anymore. Rachel and Ross have a kid together. There kid is very cute. They were once married to each other. They still get together and go two movies as if they simply have a causal relationship. This is a contradiction to. I think now Joey and Rachel are dating. I am sure that they will brake up to.

Another contradiction within the show *Friends* has to do with the modern, complex, ever-changing, technological, fast paced world that we live in today. Few people stay in one place anymore. People move a lot. Only 1 friend from my high school steal lives in the same area. Ross, Rachel, Joey, Chandler, Phoebe, and Monica never move. Except when they move in and out of each others apartments. They also never make gnu friends. Except when they date other people for about half a season and then get board and come back and end up dating each other again.

In conclusion, *Friends* is full of mini and varied contradictions. It is knot a very realistical show. For one, the characters live in Manhattan and they would not be able to afford to live their especially Ross and Phoebe. For two they never move or make new friends in eleven years!!! Yet the show is popular. I suppose there are many reasons why it is popular any weigh.

This essay took less than an hour to write. I started with an outline for each of the five paragraphs and followed it precisely and quickly, throwing in the main ideas without further thought, revision, or editing (okay, I did challenge myself to include several common misspellings that spell check would not catch). Even still the piece is not completely hopeless. The notion that a show like Friends can lead audiences to accept false impressions of reality could have proven intriguing to explore, and if this essay were not written by me as a parody but by a student in earnest, I would try to help her to focus the paper around this theme and to further develop her relevant ideas.

When you respond to the writing of your peers, keep in mind that we all have to write drafts and that it is always better to focus on the positive, how the writing could become more effective, rather than the negative, explicating what is wrong with it at the moment. In fact, when running writing workshops, I insist that all the feedback be stated in terms of what we like (so the writer knows what to keep or expand in subsequent drafts) and how it can be improved (so the writer has specific advice as to how to make the essay better). This helps writers to get excited about the potential of their essays rather than depressed about their current shortcomings. Ultimately it’s our attitude about our writing that causes us either to give up on it entirely or to continue to try to improve it.

The difference between the previous essay on *Friends* and the following one that I wrote on a strange museum in Los Angeles did not emerge from the potential interest of the subject matter but from the time and effort that I put into the writing of each. The piece that follows took several days and many drafts as I integrated experience, research, and critical examination to develop my analysis. When writing it, I used the advice I’ve given you throughout this book, so for the sake of review, I will explain how I created it before providing you with the finished draft.
When I first visited The Museum of Jurassic Technology I was dumbfounded by what awaited me inside the building. Stumbling through the dark building, I discovered a series of dioramas on such odd and diverse subjects as spores that take over the brains of ants, bats whose radars can pierce through lead, artifacts found in American trailer parks, illustrations of archaic beliefs and superstitions, and a convoluted and bizarre theory of how memory functions by a man I’d never heard of named Geoffrey Sonneabend. Later, when I discovered that parts of the collection were made up (including both Sonneabend and his theory of memory) and other parts were simply unremarkable, I felt the need to write about the experience in my journal:

How could I have been so stupid? “Museum of Jurassic Technology?” There was no technology in the Jurassic period, just a bunch of dinosaurs stomping around. I let the word “museum” lead me to think that the rest of the title made sense. And I should have realized when I entered that the items in the collection have nothing in common with each other, have no remarkable characteristics, are scientifically impossible, or just don’t make any sense. I consider myself a critical thinker but maybe I’m just as conditioned as everyone else to accept institutional authority.

As I reflected further on the significance of my visit, I decided that the museum is not the only place where questionable information gets passed off as objective and factual. In school, teachers often ask students to simply repeat information and seldom encourage them to critically examine it, a trend that has become even more common since standardized testing has dominated so much of the current curriculum. This emphasis on memorizing answers does not encourage us to think past the obvious, leading us to accept provisional theories as though they are universal truths. The museum makes us aware of this by using academic sounding phrases to get us to momentarily accept even the most ridiculous claims.

With this working thesis in mind, I set the stage for writing my essay. I researched the museum and related issues, evaluated each aspect of my visit in light of the Pentad, and brainstormed on the museum’s wider significance. I then collated and reviewed all of my observations and notes into a first draft, focusing mostly on developing this thesis. I then wrote a second draft in which I included stronger transitions and more deliberate opening and closing paragraphs. Then I produced a third draft, in which I tried to make the style more accurate and varied. I showed this draft to some of my colleagues who gave me excellent suggestions concerning other sources to consult, which parts I should cut and which I should develop, and how it might be reorganized. After this, I submitted it to the online journal, Americana, where, after completing more revisions suggested by their editors, it was originally published. When reading it, think about the process that went into creating it, how it didn’t spring out of the blue but developed slowly through careful consideration and deliberate revision.

**The Museum of Jurassic Technology**

From Wonder into Wonder Experience Opens

This article was first published in Americana by Randy Fallows.
http://americanpopularculture.com/archive/venues/jurassic_technology.htm

The Museum of Jurassic Technology, located in Los Angeles, is a place that is easier to describe by its effect than by its content. According to Lawrence Weschler, who wrote about the museum in his highly acclaimed book *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*, a visit gives one a feeling of being “a bit out of order, all shards and powder.” This reaction springs from two opposing impulses; the first is to trust that
everything in the museum is true (since after all it is a museum) and the other is a gnawing feeling that something doesn’t seem quite right. The best reason for trusting the latter impulse is that most of the collection is, to varying degrees, false. To be specific, the museum consists of dioramas revealing different aspects of “life in the Lower Jurassic,” including some that are completely made up (a series on the life and theories of a fictional psychologist), some that are made up but believed true (a series on common superstitions), some that are true but unremarkable (a series on the European mole and the night flying moth), and a few that are both true and remarkable (a series on tiny carvings that fit into the eye of a needle).

Although there are no direct statements on the museum’s walls which let the visitors in on the secret, the museum does have copies of Weschler’s book available, so the extra confused and curious can discover the attraction’s “true” nature. I was one of those who, after my first visit, purchased the book in the hopes that it would guide me out of my own confusion. It did, but it also left me repeating “of course” just as I do when I discover the solution to a riddle that seems simultaneously complicated and simple.

There is something fishy about a museum with an oxymoron in its title. Yet to be perfectly honest, I never even considered this a problem because in my mind the term “museum” eclipsed any notion to question the words that followed. I assumed that there must be a special use of the term “Jurassic” which was unfamiliar to me, a use that allowed it to be appropriately paired with the term “technology.” This tendency to ignore one’s personal reasoning in favor of a greater authority is only partly a result of the respect we attribute to museums in general; it is even more a result of years of academic conditioning to accept that information offered from an acknowledged authority must be true, significant, reasonable, and, in some way, good for us. Everything in the museum seems designed to make us feel uncomfortable with this trust.

At the entrance, there is a short video that introduces the visitor to the museum’s mission, a mission placed within a historical context. On closer inspection, the video contains oblique expressions and historical inaccuracies; however because its style and narration has a “measured voice of unassailable institutional authority,” as Weschler put it, and because there are truths mixed with the fiction, it seems reasonable enough on first examination:

The Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, California, is an educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the Lower Jurassic. Like a coat of two colors, the museum serves dual functions. On the one hand, the museum provides the academic community with a specialized repository of relics and artifacts from the Lower Jurassic, with an emphasis on those that demonstrate unusual or curious technological qualities. On the other hand, the museum serves the general public by providing the visitor a hands-on experience of “life in the Jurassic.”

The first thing that struck me was the strange use of the phrase “the Lower Jurassic.” However, the claim that the museum serves the academic community led me to believe that there must be a new use of the phrase with which I was unfamiliar. I figured that if it were simply an error, someone long before would have informed the curator that he was confusing a term that describes an ancient time period for one that depicts a modern area. My inclination to trust was furthered by the second mission, to provide a “hands on experience” for the general public, which assured me that the museum was designed with models of effective learning in mind. The video goes on to describe the museum’s place in the history of other such institutions, including what it claims to be the first natural history museum, Noah’s Ark. This
mixture of truth and legend is preparation for what lies in the main collection.

The first exhibits one encounters after leaving the video room are a series of dioramas which focus on the life and theories of Geoffrey Sonnabend. Don’t bother looking him up, or you will end up just as frustrated as Weschler, who, after his first visit, looked for references to Sonnabend in several library databases, publishing houses and historical societies before realizing that he was chasing a phantom. Like Weschler, I too fully believed that Sonnabend was a real person, partly because of the vast amount of details about his life and theories and partly because next to the dioramas of him is one of Marcel Proust tasting the tea soaked madeleine that invokes the memories of his childhood. My fondness for Proust increased my desire to learn about this more obscure theorist who also seemed to be interested in the nature of memory.

After looking through several dioramas that focus on a series of unremarkable events from Sonnabend’s life, I finally got to the one that deals with his theory of memory, the gist of which is:

All living things have a Cone of Obliscence by which the being experiences experience. This cone is sometimes also known as the Cone of True Memory (and occasionally the Characteristic Cone).
Sonnabend speaks of this cone as if it were an organ like the pancreas or spleen and like these organs its shape and characteristics are unique to the individual and remain relatively consistent over time. This cone (occasionally referred to as a horn) is composed of two elements—the Atmonic Disc (or base of the cone) which Sonnabend described as “the field of immediate consciousness of an individual” and the hollows (or interior of the cone). A third implied element of the Characteristic Cone is the Spelean Axis, an imaginary line which passes through the cone and the center of the Atmonic Disc.

Neither the explanation nor the equally obscure model that accompany it make any sense; however, both echo the rhetoric of academic discourse so well that I convinced myself that my confusion came from my inability to grasp the theory and not from the theory itself. In giving some of the parts different names, it seemed as if many other theorists had arrived at similar conclusions but quibbled with Sonnabend over terminology, and by using complex sounding terms with both certainty and consistency, I was inspired to trust those who were smart enough to invent and use this jargon.

However, despite its impressive look, when summarized and translated into common usage, the whole theory boils down to an obvious point: events that affect us deeply are more likely to be remembered than those that are everyday occurrences.

Perhaps if the theory was written out and I had more time to consider it, I might have arrived at this conclusion. However, the recording speeds past with no accompanying text except for the above model. This results in an effort of silent desperation to make sense of the whole thing, an effort that for me went something like this: Cone of Obliscence? I don’t know this term but it sounds like it’s related to “obsolescence,” so I assume it has to do with memories we no longer need and discard into a what? Spelean Axis! This is completely unfamiliar, but maybe it only intersects the cone at an angle because most experiences are not kept with us as memories; perhaps that is why he calls this part “the Hollows” since these particular experiences do not have a lot of substance.

Though the exhibit did nothing to enlighten my understanding of the nature of memory as a concept, it did inspire a few memories from my early undergraduate days when I would sit in lecture halls and listen to a professor pontificate through jargon, graphs, models and theories which I did not understand but which I assumed made sense to those who were smart enough to use them. That I began to recall these classroom experiences was quite appropriate, for, as I discovered later, the whole Sonnabend
spiel began in lecture form prior to the museum’s establishment when its eventual founder and curator, David Wilson, was explaining these “theories” to high school and university students in the Los Angeles area. One of these lectures was attended by art critic, Ralph Rugoff, who describes a classroom scene in which:

Everybody there was taking notes furiously, as if this were all on the level and was likely to be on the test—the Falls, the cones, the planes, the whole thing. It was amazing. And at one point I leaned over to Diana [David Wilson’s wife] and whispered, “This is the most incredible piece of performance art I have ever seen.” And she replied, “What makes you think it’s performance? David believes all this stuff.” Lawrence Weschler, Mr. Wilson’s Cabinet of Wonder (New York: Vintage, 1995), 41.

Wilson’s belief not withstanding, I know that many would consider it outrageous that he is passing off lies as truth in front of students who don’t know any better. I wonder, however, if the content of most lectures today will seem equally outrageous in a few years to come. Consider that a student in the early 1950s could come out of a day at school believing that a person will never walk on the moon, that Columbus was the first to discover America, and that the meaning of a literary text can be ascertained through codes completely contained within the piece itself. Isn’t it arrogant to believe that much of what currently gets taught won’t seem just as ridiculous in the not too distant future?

Wilson sees his museum as a filter through which layers of explanations become obscured, allowing us to acknowledge the mysterious nature of the subjects they attempt to explain. He states, “Certain aspects of this museum you can peel away very easily, but the reality behind, once you peel away those relatively easy layers, is more amazing still than anything those initial layers purport to be.” In short, a large part of the Museum’s purpose is to inspire the kind of confusion that leads to a healthy skepticism of institutional truths. For it’s only when people question established knowledge that new ways of seeing the world can come into existence, or as Lao Tzu put it in the Tao Te Ching, “from wonder into wonder experience opens.”

Creating an essay like this takes time, but it is time well spent. Even if you never write another analytical essay after you finish school, the resulting mental stimulation will both enable and encourage you to think about your own life more deeply and help you discover ways to make it better. And analysis can also lead us to create a better world in general. Given the problems we face stemming from environmental damage, nuclear proliferation, and economic instability, we will need a massive amount of critical thinking spread throughout the entire world to insure our very survival. Because for many years I have studied just how creative and resourceful people can be, I believe we have the ability to solve these problems and live more fulfilling lives as we do so. This can only happen, however, when more of us take the time to slow down and analyze the world around us, so that we can add our perspectives to the written and spoken conversations that make up our culture, our history, and our lives.

**Exercises**

Consider the differences between the two essays in this section. List all of the problems with the “Misleading Manhattan Friends” piece and think of why these problems did not manifest in the piece on the “Museum of Jurassic Technology.” Now go back over the piece on *Friends* and consider how you
could revise it. Begin with the content. How could the focus be more precise? What parts should be cut and which expanded? How could each aspect of analysis be further developed? Now think about the structure. How might you revise the opening and closing paragraphs? What transitions could be added? Finally, consider the style and editing. Try combining sentences for variety, finding more accurate terms, and fixing the problems in spelling and grammar.

**Key Takeaways**

- An effective style can be achieved through providing sentence variety, precise (but not needlessly complicated) diction, and a personal voice.
- Careful editing can best be achieved by reading the essay a sentence at a time backwards to see more clearly the errors in grammar and spelling.

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Structure in Literary Essays

Eli eng125 structure in literary essays from LumenLearning

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How not to Write the Introduction and Conclusion

Overview
The opening and closing of anything one writes become increasingly important with busy readers. The way a writer introduces the subject to readers could determine how they will approach the ideas or even if they will continue reading. The introduction of a research paper is especially important because research papers tend to be long and complex.

The Introduction
Your introduction should accomplish key goals:

- Grab attention. Open with a quote, fact, statistic, or short narrative.
- Convince readers that your paper is worth reading. Demonstrate the importance of your subject with details.
- Explain the basic context of your subject
- Narrow the topic to a specific thesis that clearly states your position

You may use the introduction to explain or justify research methods or address readers’ objections.

The Conclusion
A conclusion should accomplish specific tasks:

- Bring the paper to an interesting, logical end
- End with a final fact, quote, or comment to provoke readers to accept your ideas and think about the topic on their own
- Reinforce the main points of the essay without unnecessary repetition
- Restate your thesis in a strategic spot where it will have the most effect on readers
- Speculate about future action

Trite, Cliched Beginnings and Endings Send Messages

Remember, readers’ memories are not very powerful. Remind them of the specific things they should take away from the reading of your essay. Just avoid saying “In conclusion, I will review ______________________ and ________,” because this patterned ending sounds false. In fact, avoid every writing “In conclusion” to start a paragraph which is, obviously, the last!

Often, I mine the words for my introduction from the conclusion. By that point, I know more about what I have accomplished in those body paragraphs. I can copy and paste (and reword) my conclusion, which appears sharper than the original introduction. This process might work for you, and it’s easy with the copy and paste commands. Then, go back and rewrite a conclusion, making sure it’s not just parroting the wording of the introduction. Call this the Robin Hood Principle: Stealing from the rich to give to the poor.
Read aloud both your introduction and conclusion. Hear how they sound, and make sure they are of similar quality and length without seeming identical. Lastly, avoid “According to Dictionary.com,” or any “Society views the media as bad.” Provable? Arguable?)

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How to Avoid Plagiarizing

Tip #1: Make Sure You Are Very Certain about What Is and is Not Plagiarism  
Tip #2: Give Yourself Plenty of Time to Complete an Assignment

Running out of time on an assignment is a main cause of plagiarism. Rushing to meet a deadline can result in carelessness (leading to unintentional plagiarism – see the next tip) and the desire to find a quick, easy solution such as copying someone else’s work. Don’t give in to that temptation! Plagiarism is a serious academic offense, and the chance of being caught (which is likely) is not worth it.

Avoid this situation entirely by starting your assignment far ahead of time and planning out when you will complete each phase of the writing process. Even if your teacher does not require you to turn in materials for each stage of the writing process (i.e. brainstorming, creating a thesis statement, outlining, drafting, revising, etc.), set your own personal deadlines for each step along the way and make sure to give yourself more than enough time to finish everything.

Tip #3: Document Everything

Plagiarism isn’t always a conscious choice. Sometimes it can be unintentional, typically resulting from poor documentation of one’s sources during the research phase. For example, sometimes students will write down an idea from a source using words identical to or very close to those in the original, but then when they go to write their paper forget that the material was not already in their own words. Adopting good research habits can prevent this type of plagiarism.

Print, photocopy, or scan the relevant pages of every source you are using (including the title and copyright pages, since they have the information you need for a bibliographic citation). When taking notes by hand (or typed into a file), list the bibliographic information for each source you use. Make sure to put quotation marks around any wordings taken directly from the source (and note the page where you found it), and remember to put everything else into your own words right away, so there is no danger of forgetting something is a quote. Documenting where all of your ideas, information, quotations, and so on come from is an important step in avoiding plagiarism.

Tip #4: Don’t Include Too Much Material Taken from Other Sources
Tips for integrating sources into your research.

Writing assignments are about your ideas, your interpretations, and your ability to synthesize information. You should use relevant sources to support your ideas using evidence such as quotes, paraphrases, and summaries, as well as statistics and other data. But don’t lose sight of the fact that your argument is central! Including too much material from other sources can result in a paper that feels like it has been pasted together from a variety of authors, rather than a cohesive essay. Such papers also run a much higher risk of setting off plagiarism warnings in SafeAssign or other plagiarism-detecting software. Try to find a balance: use enough evidence from credible sources to prove your points but don’t let the ideas of others take the place of your own thoughts.

**Tip #5: When in Doubt, Give a Citation**

There are certain types of information – typically referred to as common knowledge – that don’t require a citation when you include them in your writing. These are facts that are widely known and can be easily found in a number of sources. They are not ideas that originated with one particular source.

Examples include scientific facts (for example, that solid, liquid, and gas are three states of matter), general historical information (for example, that George Washington was the first US president), or even information commonly known to certain groups of people but not others (for example, most musicians know that a C major triad includes the notes C, E, and G, even though many non-musicians would have no idea what a C major triad is).

For everything else, you need to include a citation, regardless of whether you are quoting directly from the source, paraphrasing it, or giving a summary. If you are at all unsure whether something qualifies as common knowledge or not, give a citation. You can also consult a more experienced figure in your field, such as your instructor, to find out if something counts as common knowledge or not.

In academic writing, the **“Quote Sandwich” approach** is useful for incorporating other writers’ voices into your essays. It gives meaning and context to a quote, and helps you avoid plagiarism. This 3-step approach offers your readers a deeper understanding of what the quote is and how it relates to your essay’s goals.
1. **Step 1:** Provide context for the source. If you haven’t used it yet in the essay, tell us the source’s title and author (if known), and any other information that’s relevant, like the purpose of the organization that published it, for instance.

2. **Step 2:** Provide the quote itself. Be sure to format correctly and use quotation marks around exact language.

3. **Step 3:** Provide a summary and/or analysis of what the quote says, and how it relates to the subject matter of your essay and your thesis.

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Academic Integrity Tutorial

The University of Maryland University College maintains a well-known academic integrity tutorial. It has many valuable tips and should refresh your skills in these areas.

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Distinguish Between Primary and Secondary Sources

Introduction

Whether conducting research in the social sciences, humanities (especially history), arts, or natural sciences, the ability to distinguish between primary and secondary source material is essential. Basically, this distinction illustrates the degree to which the author of a piece is removed from the actual event being described, informing the reader as to whether the author is reporting impressions first hand (or is first to record these immediately following an event), or conveying the experiences and opinions of others—that is, second hand.

Primary Sources

These are contemporary accounts of an event, written by someone who experienced or witnessed the event in question. These original documents (i.e., they are not about another document or account) are often diaries, letters, memoirs, journals, speeches, manuscripts, interviews and other such unpublished works. They may also include published pieces such as newspaper or magazine articles (as long as they are written soon after the fact and not as historical accounts), photographs, audio or video recordings, research reports in the natural or social sciences, or original literary or theatrical works.

Secondary Sources

The function of these is to interpret primary sources, and so can be described as at least one step removed from the event or phenomenon under review. Secondary source materials, then, interpret, assign value to, conjecture upon, and draw conclusions about the events reported in primary sources. These are usually in the form of published works such as journal articles or books, but may include radio or television documentaries, or conference proceedings.

Defining Questions

When evaluating primary or secondary sources, the following questions might be asked to help ascertain the nature and value of material being considered:

- How does the author know these details (names, dates, times)? Was the author present?
- Where does this information come from—personal experience, eyewitness accounts, or reports?
- Are the author’s conclusions based on a single piece of evidence, or have many sources been taken into account (e.g., diary entries, along with third-party eyewitness accounts, impressions of contemporaries, newspaper accounts)?

Distinguish Between Primary and Secondary Sources. Provided by: University of California Santa Cruz University Library. Located at: http://guides.library.ucsc.edu/primarysecondary. License: Public Domain: No Known Copyright CC licensed content, Shared previously
Writing an Introduction to a Literary Analysis Essay

This video discusses the steps to take when writing an introduction to a literary analysis paper.

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Paragraph Menu Settings Use No Extra Vertical Spaces

MLA calls for double-spacing with no extra spaces (around titles, heading, between paragraphs). Avoid getting a significant penalty for multiple MLA errors.

Here’s a screen shot of the proper Paragraph menu settings in Word:

![Paragraph settings screenshot]

When managing the works cited page, use the Paragraph menu to create the hanging indent that indent the second or third lines of a given works cited entry.

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- Paragraph Menu Settings Use No Extra Vertical Spaces. Authored by: Joshua Dickinson. Provided by: Jefferson Community College. Located at: [http://www.sunyjefferson.edu](http://www.sunyjefferson.edu). License: [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)
Works Cited Entries: What to Include

The Indian River State College Library pages have many useful pages covering MLA style and how to approach it. I like this page on what goes into a works cited entry for the way it reminds us that the entries have common elements we should remember.

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Creating MLA Works Cited Entries

Because of the wide variety of source formats, MLA 8 now requires that researchers follow a simple set of guidelines to create appropriate citations (instead of looking up one of the fifty-nine types of sources inside the previous handbook and following the instructions). Although there are still distinct rules you need to follow to create a citation, the rules are less rigid and allow for you to look for the main components of a citation and construct it yourself. This means you will need to think about the source and its information, select the appropriate components, and organize it in a logical and useful manner.

Regardless of the source type, you are now asked to locate the same “core elements” from your sources and place them in a standard order in order to create citations. These core elements are explained in detail below. **Note that you do not need to memorize every step of this process**, but should take this opportunity to understand how citations are created. You can always return to this page, to the MLA handbook, the MLA Style Center, or to other online resources to help you create the citations you need for your paper. Click through the following slides to learn more about each component and to see examples of MLA citations. You can also download the presentation here.

Watch this video to see examples of how to identify the core elements needed in a citation:

**Practice**

Practice your mastery of MLA documentation by correctly ordering the following citations from the Santa Fe College library:

- Book – Desktop Version | Touchscreen Version
- Chapter in an Edited Book – Desktop Version | Touchscreen Version
- Article from a Print Journal – Desktop Version | Touchscreen Version
- Journal Article from a Library Database – Desktop Version | Touchscreen Version
- Video – Desktop Version | Touchscreen Version

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*Survey of Native American Literature*
MLA In-Text Citations

Because the use of in-text citations will be so integral to your writing processes, being able to instantly craft correct citations and identify incorrect citations will save you time during writing and will help you avoid having unnecessary points taken off for citation errors.

Here is the standard correct in-text citation style according to MLA guidelines: “Quotation”

(Author’s Last Name Page Number).

Take a moment to carefully consider the placement of the parts and punctuation of this in-text citation. Note that there is no punctuation indicating the end of a sentence inside of the quotation marks—closing punctuation should instead follow the parentheses. There is also no punctuation between the author’s last name and the page number inside of the parentheses. The misplacement of these simple punctuation marks is one of the most common errors students make when crafting in-text citations.

Include the right information in the in-text citation. Every time you reference material in your paper, you must tell the reader the name of the author whose information you are citing. You must include a page number that tells the reader where, in the source, they can find this information. The most basic structure for an in-text citation looks like this: (Smith 123).

So, let’s say we have the following quote, which comes from page 100 of Elizabeth Gaskell’s North and South: “Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it.” Gaskell, Elizabeth. North and South. Oxford UP, 1973.

The following examples show incorrect MLA formatting:

“Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it.” (Gaskell 100)

“Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it” (Gaskell, 100).
“Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it” (Elizabeth Gaskell 100).

Incorrect because the period falls within the quotation marks
Incorrect because of the comma separating the author’s last name and the page number
Incorrect because the author’s full name is used instead of just her last name
Incorrect because the title of the work appears, rather than the author’s last name; the title should only be used if no author name is provided

The following example shows correct MLA formatting:

“Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it” (Gaskell 100).

However, there are exceptions to the above citation guideline. Consider the following format of an in-text citation, which is also formed correctly.

Elizabeth Gaskell’s narrator makes it clear that “Margaret had never spoken of Helstone since she left it” (100).

Do you notice the difference between this citation format and the format of the first example? Unlike the first example, this citation does not list the author’s last name inside the parentheses. This is because the last name is included in quotation’s introduction, which makes the identity of the author clear to the reader. Including the author’s last name again inside of the parenthesis would be thus redundant and is not required for MLA citation.

The same rule about inclusion of the author’s last name applies for paraphrased information, as well, as shown in the following example:

Elizabeth Gaskell’s narrator makes it clear that her protagonist does not speak of her home once she is in Milton (100).

In this paraphrase, the author’s last name precedes the paraphrased material, but as in the case of quotation integration, if the author’s last name is not described in the paraphrase then it is required inside of the parentheses before the page number.
When and How to Create MLA In-Text Citations

Is this your own, original idea or information?  
**YES**  
No citation needed  
**NO**  
Does your source have an author?  
**YES**  
Did you mention the author’s name in the text already? (ex. According to Dr. Wilson...)  
**YES**  
No need to mention the author again.  
**NO**  
Include the title of the source, or the first word of the title, in parentheses at the end of the sentence (unless you already mentioned the title in the text). Ex.: (“Beyond”).  

Write the author’s last name in parentheses at the end of your sentence. Ex: (Wilson).

Does your source have page numbers?  
**NO**  
If it’s a media source, cite the relevant time range in parentheses (ex. “CSI” 00:01:15-50)  
**YES**  
Did you mention the author or title already within your text?  
**YES**  
Add the page number(s) in parentheses at the end of the sentence. Ex: According to Dr. Wilson, wildlife should remain in the wild (37).  
**NO**  
Put the page number(s) after the author’s name or title in the parentheses at the end of the sentence. Ex.: Wildlife should remain in the wild (Wilson 37).

Your citation is complete!

Repeat this process for each quote, paraphrase, and summary you include from other sources. Remember that in-text citations typically include the author’s name and page number. Ex.: (Warner 54).

Being more compliant with MLA in-text citation guidelines will become easier if you review these examples and the citation rules on which they rely.
In-text citations are often parenthetical, meaning you add information to the end of a sentence in parentheses. But if you include that necessary information in the language of the sentence itself, you should not include the parenthetical citation. This example shows you proper uses of in-text citations.

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Annotated Bibliographies: An Illustrated Guide

A quick tour of the what, why, and how of an annotated bibliography.

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- Annotated Bibliographies: An Illustrated Guide. **Authored by:** Carnegie Vincent. **Located at:** [https://youtu.be/-LpgXJvQnEc](https://youtu.be/-LpgXJvQnEc). **License:** [CC BY: Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/)
Checklist: Using Quotations Effectively

Before you include a quotation in your essay, ask yourself: Which point of mine does the quotation support? Why should the passage be quoted rather than paraphrased or summarized? What do my readers need to know about the quotation’s author?

As you integrate quotations into your draft, ask yourself:

O Have I sufficiently introduced the quotation with a phrase or sentence? O Will my readers know whom I am quoting and why?
O Does the quotation fit smoothly into my own sentence? As you revise your work, ask yourself:

O Have I strung together too many quotations? O Have I used long quotations sparingly?
O Have I used quotation marks properly and documented each quote?

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VI

Chapter 4: Literary Analysis

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Analysis is the Breaking Down of a Whole into its Parts

Part-to-whole relationships and breaking those down into their functions is what we do when we analyze. We argue about how the parts function. For practice, look at the following image. It is Edward Hicks’s *The Cornell Farm*. The image has a fascinating composition, so watch the way one’s eyes are directed from area to area in the painting. Are there any symbols? Signs? (Do you know the difference between a sign and a symbol?)

When we write, we analyze most of the time. Whether we are reading a student post or model essay, we look over each text and think about how we are looking. It’s a composition, so some of the vocabulary we use in its analysis is shared with other humanities courses like art appreciation or music appreciation.

Consider how the whole is broken down. If its artful, then there’s a guiding of one’s eyes as well as a frustration of easy expectations. See what you see and share that! Again, italicize the artworks’ titles.

Edward Hicks, *The Cornell Farm* (1848).

Clearly, we can argue the parts and how they function. Analysis is all about functions in the structure and effects upon the viewer/reader. It’s worth remembering that the act is destructive (*lysis* meaning just that), sort of like taking apart a watch and seeing if it will function without this or that gear. And, no, don’t use the creationist blind watchmaker argument here just because I mentioned watches. Their idea that something as sophisticated as an eye could not have evolved is *easily-enough refuted*.

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With Analysis, Focus Upon Functions or Effects

At the college level, putting in the right-sounding quotes in the right-looking spots of a body paragraph is insufficient. Writers are expected to use the quotes as excuses to argue their points. Close reading is a crucial skill which helps the writer make sense of how something makes sense. Humanities courses largely aim to enhance or bring about readers’ abilities to handle complex, indirect texts that demand multiple responses.

Close reading is an analytical activity where the writer picks parts of larger whole and discusses how they function. This can be done while annotating or deciding what to say about an annotated chunk of text. Because your audience often knows the text and has ideas about how it works, it is up to you to do more than simply point out the existence of an important line, phrase, or word. Within the line, the critic must move from pointing out an idea to arguing how it functions. What effect is created by that phrase? How does this word affect readers? These questions get proved after careful setup and cited quotation work.

Once you have dissected a speech, description, or dialogue, remember that you have committed a fairly aggressive, destructive act. You yanked a part from the whole. Remember to use the late portions of paragraphs to put the pieces back together. (“Pick up your toys when you are done with them!”)

What You Might Look for in a Text

Focus on an author’s use of complexity by discussing the effects of any of the following: word choice (diction) word order (syntax)

connotation denotation

irony (dramatic, situational, verbal) symbolism mood

tone

paradox (seeming contradiction) how words fit/bring about character rhetorical

appeals (logos, ethos, pathos) logical patterns (valid or not)

Rhetorical modes (description, narration, definition, process, illustration, comparison/contrast, classification/division, cause/effect, argument)

Basically, looking for moves of any sort is a good starting point with analysis. CC licensed content, Original

The Nature of Analysis

Learning Objectives

1. Define analysis.
2. Show how we use analysis in everyday situations and in academic writing and discussion.
3. Understand the components of analysis (assertions, examples, explanations, significance), and explain why each is a necessary part of any analysis.
4. Show how too much attention to one particular component of analysis makes an essay seem like a different type of writing.

Jeff is not happy. His clock shows 2 a.m., but his computer screen shows nothing. For the last four hours he has tried to get started on an essay on William Shakespeare’s The Tempest, but he just doesn’t know where to begin. “It’s Professor Johnson’s fault I’m in this mess,” he thinks to himself. “My other teachers always told me exactly what and how to write, but Professor Johnson asked us to focus on what each of us finds important about the play. She even told us that no one knows Shakespeare’s real intentions, and that a million ways to analyze the play are possible.” Jeff slams his hand down on the table. “If this is true, how do I know when I’ve found the right interpretation?” And Professor Johnson made it even more difficult for Jeff by instructing her students not to summarize the plot or give unsupported opinions, but to come up with their own interpretations, show why they are important, and justify them through close readings of particular scenes. “No one has ever shown me how to do this,” Jeff grumbles to himself as he gulps down his third cup of coffee.

In actuality, Jeff already possesses the ability to write an analytical essay. He would have realized this if he had considered the discussions and activities he engaged in during the previous week. In planning a date, and in thinking of the best way to convince his parents to send him more money, Jeff had to carefully evaluate a variety of situations to develop a point of view that he then had to justify and show why it mattered. In each of these instances, he made plenty of assertions, statements which present points of view; used examples, specific passages, scenes, events, or items which inspire these points of view; gave explanations, statements which reveal how the examples support and/or complicate the assertions; and provided significance, statements which reveal the importance of the analysis to our personal and/or cultural concerns.

Analysis is a way of understanding a subject by using each of these elements, expressing an opinion (making assertions), supporting that opinion (including examples), justifying that opinion (explaining the examples), and showing why the opinion matters (extending the significance). The second letter in the second component (examples) helps create the acronym AXES, which is the plural form of both axe and axis. This acronym provides a way not only to remember the four components but also to visualize them working together. Like an axe, analysis allows us to “chop” our subjects into their essential components so that we can examine the pieces more thoroughly, and, like an axis, analysis inspires insights that become the new reference points around which we rearrange these pieces.

Though a complete analysis always needs to use these elements, the reasons for engaging in it may vary widely. For instance, sometimes the goal is to persuade the reader to accept an interpretation or to
adapt a course of action, and other times the goal is to explore several possible interpretations or courses of action without settling on any one in particular. But whether the goal is to persuade, explore, or enlighten, analysis should always spring from a careful examination of a given subject. I always tell my students that they do not need to convince me that their points of view are correct but rather to reveal that they have thought about their subject thoroughly and arrived at reasonable and significant considerations.

The structure and form of an analysis can vary as widely as the many reasons for producing one. Though an analysis should include attention to each of the four main components, it should not be written in a formulaic manner, like those tiresome five-paragraph essays you might recall from high school: “I spent my summer vacation in three ways: working, partying and relaxing. Each of these activities helped me in three aspects of my life: mentally, physically and psychologically.” At best, formulaic essays serve as training wheels that need to come off when you are ready for more sophisticated kinds of writing. Rigorous analysis doesn’t rely on formulas or clichés, and its elements may occur in different orders and with various emphases, depending on your purpose and audience. In fact, individual elements may sometimes blend together because a section may serve more than one function. With practice, you won’t even need to recall the acronym AXES when producing an analysis, because you will have mastered when and how to express each of its components.

Though it would be impossible to outline all the possible manifestations and combinations of these elements of analysis, this book will help you to create, balance, and express each of them with precision, clarity, and voice. The first task is to make certain all these elements are present to some degree throughout your paper, because when any one is missing or dominates too much, the essay starts to drift from analysis to a different mode of writing. Consider, for instance, how Jeff might have gotten off track when trying to respond to the following speech from The Tempest, when the character Prospero becomes morose as the play he is putting on within the play becomes interrupted:

Our revels now are ended. These, our actors, As I
foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air; into thin air.
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision
The cloud capped towers, the great globe itself, Yea, all
which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff As
dreams are made on, and our little life Is
rounded with a sleep

(Act IV, Scene 1: 148-57).
Response 1: Review (assertion emphasis)

This is a very famous speech about how our lives are like dreams. No wonder Shakespeare is such a great playwright. He continuously and brilliantly demonstrates that he knows what life is about; this is why this is such a great speech and I would recommend this play for everybody.

Assertions are necessary to communicate your points of view, but when you make only declarative statements of taste, your essays will seem less like analyses and more like reviews. A review can be useful, especially when considering whether a movie might be worth spending money on, but in an analysis you should not just state your opinions but also explain how you arrived at them and explore why they matter.

Response 2: Summary (example emphasis)

First Prospero gets angry because his play was interrupted, causing his magical actors to disappear. Next, he shows how everything will dissolve in time: the sets of his theater, the actors, and even “the great globe itself.” He concludes by comparing our lives to dreams, pointing out how both are surrounded by sleep.

Like a review, a summary can sometimes be useful, especially when we want the plot of a piece or basic arguments of a policy described to us in a hurry. However, a summary stops short of being an analysis because it simply covers the main aspects of the object for analysis and does not provide any new perspective as to why it is significant. Though you need to provide examples, you should select and discuss only those details that shed the most light on your points of view. Always remember that people want to read your essay to learn your perspective on what you are analyzing; otherwise, they could just examine the piece for themselves.

Response 3: Description (explanation emphasis)

In Prospero’s speech, Shakespeare points out how life, plays, and dreams are always being interrupted. He makes a lot of comparisons between these different areas of existence, yet makes them all seem somewhat similar. I never really thought about how they are all so similar, but Shakespeare helps me consider ways they all kind of fit together.

Though you should explain how you derived your assertions from your examples and not just let the piece speak for itself, you should not do so in too general a manner. You do not want to give the impression that you are trying to remember the details of a piece that you are too lazy to pull out and reconsider, but that you are engaging in a close reading or a careful consideration of all the aspects of an issue. Your analysis should seem like it was a challenge for you to write, and not something that you
pieced together from vague recollections.

Response 4: Tangent (significance emphasis)

This speech reminds me that life is short. My father keeps telling me that life is over before you even realize it, and he should know because he’s getting pretty old (he’s in his late 40s!). I think it also shows that it’s important to be careful about what you dream of because these dreams may affect the way you choose to live your life. I dream about being a famous surfer and that’s what makes me try hard to be one.

If an essay had no significance, the reader might constantly think, “So what?” You might provide a very close reading of the piece, but unless you have a reason for drawing our attention to it, your essay will not leave the reader with anything new or important to consider. Be careful, however, not to leave the piece completely behind when discussing why it matters, or your essay will seem less like an analysis and more like an excuse to deliver a soapbox speech or to write about something that is easier for you to discuss.

Response 5: Analysis (attention to each aspect)

In The Tempest, William Shakespeare connects plays, lives, and dreams by showing that while each contains an illusion of permanence, they’re all only temporary. The “baseless fabric of this vision” of “cloud capped towers” may immediately refer to the painted sets contained within the “great globe itself,” the name of Shakespeare’s theater. Yet when we measure time in years rather than hours, we can see that most of the real “cloud capped towers” of the Seventeenth Century have already faded and at some point in the future even the globe we live on will disappear and “leave not a rack behind.” Likewise, it is not just the actors who are “such stuff as dreams are made on,” but all of us. We are unconscious of the world before we are born and after we die, so our waking lives mirror our sleeping lives. Thinking of it this way leaves me with mixed feelings. On the one hand, I find it a bit disturbing to be reminded that neither we nor our world are permanent and all that we do will dissipate in time. On the other hand, it inspires me to enjoy my life further and not to worry too much about my inability to accomplish every one of my goals because nothing I do will last forever anyway.

Had Jeff not waited until the last minute to write his essay, he might have come up with a paragraph like this last one that gives adequate attention to each of the elements of analysis. The main assertion that our dreams, our lives, and our creative works only provide an illusion of permanence sets the analytical stage in a compelling fashion. The examples are well chosen and intelligently explained. For instance, the analysis shows that whether we see the “cloud capped towers” as actually existing or as paintings on the sets of the stage, they both have succumbed to time. Finally, it reveals the significance of the author’s perspective without coming to a trite conclusion or skipping off on a tangent. In general, the analysis reflects the thoughts of a writer who is engaged enough with the text to take the time to
carefully consider the quote and reflect on its implications. Though the paragraph could use a more thorough development (especially of the significance) and a more deliberate style, it certainly reveals a more compelling analysis than the previous four paragraphs.

So is it a waste of time to write paragraphs that mostly consist of summaries, opinions, descriptions, or tangents? Absolutely not. Thinking and writing are not separate processes but occur simultaneously, and we often need to produce responses that focus on one of these simpler rhetorical modes before we can understand the underlying complexity that allows us to develop a more thorough analysis. And Jeff will experience essentially the same thinking and writing process when he switches from his Shakespeare essay to the ones he’s composing for his courses in history, political science, and psychology. Understanding an event, an issue, or an aspect of human nature requires careful attention to the details of what happened and to the arguments and theories that make up a particular perspective. But before Jeff can develop his own point of view on any of these subjects, he first needs to consider what might influence the way he sees them, a process that will require him to look at his culture and his experiences while consulting the points of view of others.

Exercises

Write about a time you tried to persuade a friend to see a creative work, issue or subject in the way that you do. What assertions did you make? What examples did you use to back them up? How did you explain how you saw the examples? How did you reveal the lasting significance of the decision that you wanted your friend to make? How did these components take a different form the next time you tried to persuade your friend to see a different subject in a new light?

Key Takeaways

- We use analysis many times throughout the day, especially when trying to persuade others to see our points of view.
- Analysis consists of four main components: assertions (our points of view), examples (evidence that supports these points of view), explanations (justifications of these points of view), and significance (discussions of why these points of view matter).
- These components need to be present for an effective analysis, but not in a strictly formulaic manner; they can appear throughout an essay to various degrees and in various orders.

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How to Analyze a Novel

Setting

*Setting* is a description of where and when the story takes place.

- What aspects make up the setting?
  - Geography, weather, time of day, social conditions?
- What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?
- Study the time period which is also part of the setting. When was the story written?
  - Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
  - How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere or social circumstances of the novel?

Characterization

*Characterization* deals with how the characters are described. through

- dialogue?
- by the way they speak?
- physical appearance? thoughts and feelings?
- interaction – the way they act towards other characters? Are they static characters who do not change?
- Do they develop by the end of the story?
- What type of characters are they?
- What qualities stand out?
- Are they stereotypes?
- Are the characters believable?

Plot and structure

The *plot* is the main sequence of events that make up the story.

- What are the most important events?
- How is the plot structured? Is it linear, chronological or does it move back and forth? Are there turning points, a climax and/or an anticlimax?
- Is the plot believable?
Narrator and Point of view

The narrator is the person telling the story. *Point of view:* whose eyes the story is being told through.

- Who is the narrator or speaker in the story? Is the narrator the main character?
- Does the author speak through one of the characters? Is the story written in the first person “I” point of view?
- Is the story written in a detached third person “he/she” point of view?
- Is the story written in an “all-knowing” 3rd person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?

Conflict

*Conflict* or tension is usually the heart of the novel and is related to the main character.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
  - Is it internal where the character suffers inwardly?
  - Is it external caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

Theme

The theme is the main idea, lesson or message in the novel. It is usually an abstract, universal idea about the human condition, society or life, to name a few.

- How does the theme shine through in the story?
- Are any elements repeated that may suggest a theme? What other themes are there?

Style

The author’s style has to do with the author’s vocabulary, use of imagery, tone or feeling of the story. It has to do with his attitude towards the subject. In some novels the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold or dramatic.

- Is the text full of figurative language?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors, similes?
  An example of a metaphor is when someone says, “My love, you are a rose”. An example of a simile is “My darling, you are like a rose.”
- What images are used?

Your literary analysis of a novel will often be in the form of an essay or book report where you will be asked to give your opinions of the novel at the end. To conclude, choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments. Try to view the novel as a whole and try to give a balanced analysis.

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How to Analyze a Short Story

Old Fence. A short story has a structure and a message. Can you analyze this picture in much the same way as a short story?

What Is a Short Story?

A short story is a work of short, narrative prose that is usually centered around one single event. It is limited in scope and has an introduction, body and conclusion. Although a short story has much in common with a novel (See How to Analyze a Novel), it is written with much greater precision. You will often be asked to write a literary analysis. An analysis of a short story requires basic knowledge of literary elements. The following guide and questions may help you:

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place. In a short story there are fewer settings compared to a novel. The time is more limited. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How is the setting created? Consider geography, weather, time of day, social conditions, etc. What role does setting play in the story? Is it an important part of the plot or theme? Or is it just a backdrop against which the action takes place?

Study the time period, which is also part of the setting, and ask yourself the following:
Survey of Native American Literature

- When was the story written?
- Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
- How does the time period affect the language, atmosphere or social circumstances of the short story?

**Characterization**

Characterization deals with how the characters in the story are described. In short stories there are usually fewer characters compared to a novel. They usually focus on one central character or protagonist. Ask yourself the following:

- Who is the main character?
- Are the main character and other characters described through dialogue – by the way they speak (dialect or slang for instance)?
- Has the author described the characters by physical appearance, thoughts and feelings, and interaction (the way they act towards others)?
- Are they static/flat characters who do not change? Are they dynamic/round characters who DO change?
- What type of characters are they? What qualities stand out? Are they stereotypes? Are the characters believable?

**Plot and structure**

The plot is the main sequence of events that make up the story. In short stories the plot is usually centered around one experience or significant moment. Consider the following questions:

- What is the most important event?
- How is the plot structured? Is it linear, chronological or does it move around? Is the plot believable?

**Narrator and Point of view**

The narrator is the person telling the story. Consider this question: Are the narrator and the main character the same?

By point of view we mean from whose eyes the story is being told. Short stories tend to be told through one character’s point of view. The following are important questions to consider:

- Who is the narrator or speaker in the story?
- Does the author speak through the main character?
- Is the story written in the first person “I” point of view?
- Is the story written in a detached third person “he/she” point of view?
- Is there an “all-knowing” third person who can reveal what all the characters are thinking and doing at all times and in all places?
Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the short story and is related to the main character. In a short story there is usually one main struggle.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
- Is it an internal conflict within the character?
- Is it an external conflict caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

Climax

The climax is the point of greatest tension or intensity in the short story. It can also be the point where events take a major turn as the story races towards its conclusion. Ask yourself:

- Is there a turning point in the story?
- When does the climax take place?

Theme

The theme is the main idea, lesson, or message in the short story. It may be an abstract idea about the human condition, society, or life. Ask yourself:

- How is the theme expressed?
- Are any elements repeated and therefore suggest a theme? Is there more than one theme?

Style

The author’s style has to do with the his or her vocabulary, use of imagery, tone, or the feeling of the story. It has to do with the author’s attitude toward the subject. In some short stories the tone can be ironic, humorous, cold, or dramatic.

- Is the author’s language full of figurative language? What images are used?
- Does the author use a lot of symbolism? Metaphors (comparisons that do not use “as” or “like”) or similes (comparisons that use “as” or “like”)?

Your literary analysis of a short story will often be in the form of an essay where you may be asked to give your opinions of the short story at the end. Choose the elements that made the greatest impression on you. Point out which character/characters you liked best or least and always support your arguments.

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How to Analyze Poetry

Poetry is a form of expression. The poet uses his/her own personal and private language which leaves poetry open to different interpretations. Although the poet may have had one specific idea or purpose in mind, the reader’s response may be completely different. Nevertheless, this does not mean that you may interpret poetry any way you wish. All interpretations must be supported by direct reference to the text. As with any type of literary analysis, you need a basic knowledge of the elements of poetry. The following guide and questions will help you.

- Read the poem in its entirety to get a general impression. What is the poem about?
- What is the title of the poem?
- Who is speaker or narrative voice of the poem To
- whom is the speaker speaking?
- What is the purpose of the poem: to describe, amuse, entertain, narrate, inform, express grief, celebrate or commemorate?
- What is the tone of the poem? Sad, happy, melancholy, bitter?

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- How to Analyze Poetry. **Authored by:** Carol Dwankowski, Catharine Rudd, and Celia Suzanna Sandor. **Provided by:** NDLA. **Located at:** http://ndl.no/en/node/14814?fag=42. **License:** CC BY- SA: Attribution-ShareAlike
Finding Literary Criticism

Literary criticism analyzes fiction, poetry, drama and some types of non-fiction by considering key issues such as plot, character, setting, theme, imagery, and voice. Literary criticism may also consider the effectiveness of a work of literature, but it’s important to note that in this context the word “criticism” doesn’t simply mean finding fault with the writing but rather looking at it from a critical or analytical viewpoint in order to understand it better.

It’s also important to note that literary criticism involves more than just summarizing the plot or offering biographical information about the author.

Evaluating Sources of Literary Criticism

If you’re asked to find scholarly sources of literary criticism, you should look for journals that are peer-reviewed. In other words, before articles are accepted for publication in the journal, they’re reviewed by other scholars. Articles in a scholarly journal will also include citations for other works that are referenced. Scholarly books, likewise, will document their sources and are usually written by someone affiliated with a college or university and published by a university press.

Even if you know an article has come from a peer-reviewed journal, you may still wonder about its relevance, particularly if the work or author you’re researching is one that’s been studied extensively. One way to get more information about a source is to type the title of the article into Google Scholar and see how many times it’s been cited. The higher the number, the more likely it is that the article is influential—or at least controversial. You can do a similar search to learn more about the reputation of a journal, book, or author.

Finally, when looking for critical work, don’t rely on sources like SparkNotes, which provide help for students but are not considered reputable scholarly sources.

Sources of Literary Criticism

An ideal place to begin your search for literary criticism is with your college library, which will often have InfoGuides that will help you with research. College librarians also designate which databases are best as sources in certain cases. For example, Academic Search Complete: EBSCO, database is a general source for scholarly works in a variety of disciplines. It covers works on the literature of all languages.

A few other resources you may want to investigate:

**African American Review:** This online journal specifically focuses on African American literature and ethnic studies, “[providing] a lively exchange between writers and scholars in the arts, humanities, and social sciences who hold diverse perspectives on African American literature and culture.” The website features full-text online access to back issues. **Free access.**

**American Literary Scholarship:** This journal offers current critical analysis of American literature.
Among the writers discussed are Whitman, Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Twain, and Faulkner. It is available in print at PS3.A47 or electronically. Not free.

**The Year’s Work in English Studies:** This bibliography lists and assesses the scholarly literary criticism published in a given year. The information is presented according to major literary periods, such as “American Literature to 1900” and can also be searched by author. It can be accessed at: [ywes.oxfordjournals.org](http://ywes.oxfordjournals.org/)

Free

**Also recommended for you:**

- [Literary Terms](#)
- [Analyzing Novels & Short Stories](#)
- [Analyzing Plays](#)
- [Analyzing Poetry](#)

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- Finding Literary Criticism. **Provided by:** The University Writing Center, Texas A&M University. **Located at:** [http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/Students/Handouts-Guides/Handouts-%28Get-It-Written%29/Research/Finding-Literary-Criticism](http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/Students/Handouts-Guides/Handouts-%28Get-It-Written%29/Research/Finding-Literary-Criticism), **License:** [CC BY-NC-ND: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)
Reader-Response Criticism

Summary

We have examined many schools of literary criticism. Here you will find an in-depth look at one of them: Reader-Response.

The Purpose of Reader-Response

Reader-response suggests that the role of the reader is essential to the meaning of a text, for only in the reading experience does the literary work come alive. For example, in Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), the monster doesn’t exist, so to speak, until the reader reads *Frankenstein* and reanimates it to life, becoming a co-creator of the text.

Thus, the purpose of a reading response is examining, explaining, and defending your personal reaction to a text. Your critical reading of a text asks you to explore:

- why you like or dislike the text;
- explain whether you agree or disagree with the author; identify the
- text’s purpose; and
- critique the text.

There is no right or wrong answer to a reading response. Nonetheless, it is important that you demonstrate an understanding of the reading and clearly explain and support your reactions. Do not use the standard approach of just writing: “I liked this text because it is so cool and the ending made me feel happy,” or “I hated it because it was stupid, and had nothing at all to do with my life, and was too negative and boring.” In writing a response you may assume the reader has already read the text.

Thus, do not summarize the contents of the text at length. Instead, take a systematic, analytical approach to the text.

Write as a Scholar

When writing a reader-response write as an educated adult addressing other adults or fellow scholars.

As a beginning scholar, if you write that something has nothing to do with you or does not pass your “Who cares?” test, but many other people think that it is important and great, readers will probably not agree with you that the text is dull or boring. Instead, they may conclude that you are dull and boring, that you are too immature or uneducated to understand what important things the author wrote.

Criticize with Examples

If you did not like a text, that is fine, but criticize it either from:

- *principle*, for example: Is
  - the text racist?
Survey of Native American Literature

- Does the text unreasonably puts down things, such as religion, or groups of people, such as women or adolescents, conservatives or democrats, etc?
- Does the text include factual errors or outright lies? Is it too dark and despairing? Is it falsely positive?

- form, for example:
  - Is the text poorly written?
  - Does it contain too much verbal “fat”? Is it
too emotional or too childish?
  - Does it have too many facts and figures? Are
  - there typos or other errors in the text?
  - Do the ideas wander around without making a point?

In each of these cases, do not simply criticize, but give examples. As a beginning scholar, be cautious of criticizing any text as “confusing” or “crazy,” since readers might simply conclude that you are too ignorant or slow to understand and appreciate it.

The Structure of a Reader-Response Essay

Choosing a text to study is the first step in writing a reader-response essay. Once you have chosen the text, your challenge is to connect with it and have a “conversation” with the text.

In the beginning paragraph of your reader-response essay, be sure to mention the following:

- title of the work to which you are responding; the
- author; and
- the main thesis of the text.

Then, do your best to answer the questions below. Remember, however, that you are writing an essay, not filling out a short-answer worksheet. You do not need to work through these questions in order, one by one, in your essay. Rather, your paper as a whole should be sure to address these questions in some way.

- What does the text have to do with you, personally, and with your life (past, present or future)? It is not acceptable to write that the text has NOTHING to do with you, since just about everything humans can write has to do in some way with every other human.
- How much does the text agree or clash with your view of the world, and what you consider right and wrong? Use several quotes as examples of how it agrees with and supports what you think about the world, about right and wrong, and about what you think it is to be human. Use quotes and examples to discuss how the text disagrees with what you think about the world and about right and wrong.
- What did you learn, and how much were your views and opinions challenged or changed by this text, if at all? Did the text communicate with you? Why or why not? Give examples of how your views might have changed or been strengthened (or perhaps, of why the text failed to convince you, the way it is). Please do not write “I agree with everything the author wrote,” since everybody disagrees about something, even if it is a tiny point. Use quotes to illustrate your points of challenge, or where you were persuaded, or where it left you cold.
- How well does the text address things that you, personally, care about and consider important to
the world? How does it address things that are important to your family, your community, your ethnic group, to people of your economic or social class or background, or your faith tradition? If not, who does or did the text serve? Did it pass the “Who cares?” test? Use quotes from the text to illustrate.

- What can you praise about the text? What problems did you have with it? Reading and writing “critically” does not mean the same thing as “criticizing,” in everyday language (complaining or griping, fault-finding, nit-picking). Your “critique” can and should be positive and praise the text if possible, as well as pointing out problems, disagreements and shortcomings.
- How well did you enjoy the text (or not) as entertainment or as a work of art? Use quotes or examples to illustrate the quality of the text as art or entertainment. Of course, be aware that some texts are not meant to be entertainment or art: a news report or textbook, for instance, may be neither entertaining or artistic, but may still be important and successful.

For the conclusion, you might want to discuss: your

- overall reaction to the text;
- whether you would read something else like this in the future; whether you
  would read something else by this author; and
- if would you recommend read this text to someone else and why.

Key Takeaways

- In reader-response, the reader is essential to the meaning of a text for they bring the text to life. The purpose of a reading response is examining, explaining, and defending your personal reaction to a text.
- When writing a reader-response, write as an educated adult addressing other adults or fellow scholars.
- As a beginning scholar, be cautious of criticizing any text as “boring,” “crazy,” or “dull.” If you do criticize, base your criticism on the principles and form of the text itself.
- The challenge of a reader-response is to show how you connected with the text.

Examples

Reader-Response Essay Example

To Misread or to Rebel: A Woman’s Reading of “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty”

At its simplest, reading is “an activity that is guided by the text; this must be processed by the reader who is then, in turn, affected by what he has processed” (Iser 63). The text is the compass and map, the reader is the explorer. However, the explorer cannot disregard those unexpected boulders in the path which he or she encounters along the journey that are not written on the map. Likewise, the woman reader does not come to the text without outside influences. She comes with her experiences as a woman—a professional woman, a divorcée, a single mother. Her reading, then, is influenced by her experiences. So when she reads a piece of literature like “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” by James Thurber, which paints a highly negative picture of Mitty’s wife, the woman reader is forced to either misread the story and accept Mrs. Mitty as a domineering, mothering wife, or rebel against that picture.
and become angry at the society which sees her that way.

Due to pre-existing sociosexual standards, women see characters, family structures, even societal structures from the bottom as an oppressed group rather than from a powerful position on the top, as men do. As Louise Rosenblatt states: a reader’s “tendency toward identification [with characters or events] will certainly be guided by our preoccupations at the time we read. Our problems and needs may lead us to focus on those characters and situations through which we may achieve the satisfactions, the balanced vision, or perhaps merely the unequivocal motives unattained in our own lives” (38). A woman reader who feels chained by her role as a housewife is more likely to identify with an individual who is oppressed or feels trapped than the reader’s executive husband is. Likewise, a woman who is unable to have children might respond to a story of a child’s death more emotionally than a woman who does not want children. However, if the perspective of a woman does not match that of the male author whose work she is reading, a woman reader who has been shaped by a male-dominated society is forced to misread the text, reacting to the “words on the page in one way rather than another because she operates according to the same set of rules that the author used to generate them” (Tompkins xvii). By accepting the author’s perspective and reading the text as he intended, the woman reader is forced to disregard her own, female perspective. This, in turn, leads to a concept called “asymmetrical contingency,” described by Iser as that which occurs “when Partner A gives up trying to implement his own behavioral plan and without resistance follows that of Partner B. He adapts himself to and is absorbed by the behavioral strategy of B” (164). Using this argument, it becomes clear that a woman reader (Partner A) when faced with a text written by a man (Partner B) will most likely succumb to the perspective of the writer and she is thus forced to misread the text. Or, she could rebel against the text and raise an angry, feminist voice in protest.

James Thurber, in the eyes of most literary critics, is one of the foremost American humorists of the 20th century, and his short story “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” is believed to have “ushered in a major [literary] period … where the individual can maintain his self … an appropriate way of assaulting rigid forms” (Elias 432). The rigid form in Thurber’s story is Mrs. Mitty, the main character’s wife. She is portrayed by Walter Mitty as a horrible, mothering nag. As a way of escaping her constant griping, he imagines fantastic daydreams which carry him away from Mrs. Mitty’s voice. Yet she repeatedly interrupts his reveries and Mitty responds to her as though she is “grossly unfamiliar, like a strange woman who had yelled at him in the crowd” (286). Not only is his wife annoying to him, but she is also distant and removed from what he cares about, like a stranger. When she does speak to him, it seems reflective of the way a mother would speak to a child. For example, Mrs. Mitty asks, “‘Why don’t you wear your gloves? Have you lost your gloves?’ Walter Mitty reached in a pocket and brought out the gloves. He put them on, but after she had turned and gone into the building and he had driven on to a red light, he took them off again” (286). Mrs. Mitty’s care for her husband’s health is seen as nagging to Walter Mitty, and the audience is amused that he responds like a child and does the opposite of what Mrs. Mitty asked of him. Finally, the clearest way in which Mrs. Mitty is portrayed as a burdensome wife is at the end of the piece when Walter, waiting for his wife to exit the store, imagines that he is facing “the firing squad; erect and motionless, proud and disdainful, Walter Mitty the Undefeated, inscrutable to the last” (289). Not only is Mrs. Mitty portrayed as a mothering, bothersome hen, but she is ultimately described as that which will be the death of Walter Mitty.

Mrs. Mitty is a direct literary descendant of the first woman to be stereotyped as a nagging wife, Dame Van Winkle, the creation of the American writer, Washington Irving. Likewise, Walter Mitty is a reflection of his dreaming predecessor, Rip Van Winkle, who falls into a deep sleep for a hundred years and awakes to the relief of finding out that his nagging wife has died. Judith Fetterley explains in her
book, The Resisting Reader, how such a portrayal of women forces a woman who reads “Rip Van Winkle” and other such stories “to find herself excluded from the experience of the story” so that she “cannot read the story without being assaulted by the negative images of women it presents” (10). The result, it seems, is for a woman reader of a story like “Rip Van Winkle” or “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty” to either be excluded from the text, or accept the negative images of women the story puts forth. As Fetterley points out, “The consequence for the female reader is a divided self. She is asked to identify with Rip and against herself, to scorn the amiable sex and act just like it, to laugh at Dame Van Winkle and accept that she represents ‘woman,’ to be at once both repressor and repressed, and ultimately to realize that she is neither” (11). Thus, a woman is forced to misread the text and accept “woman as villain.” as Fetterley names it, or rebel against both the story and its message.

So how does a woman reader respond to this portrayal of Mrs. Mitty? If she were to follow Iser’s claim, she would defer to the male point of view presented by the author. She would sympathize with Mitty, as Thurber wants us to do, and see domineering women in her own life that resemble Mrs. Mitty. She may see her mother and remember all the times that she nagged her about zipping up her coat against the bitter winter wind. Or the female reader might identify Mrs. Mitty with her controlling mother-in-law and chuckle at Mitty’s attempts to escape her control, just as her husband tries to escape the criticism and control of his own mother. Iser’s ideal female reader would undoubtedly look at her own position as mother and wife and would vow to never become such a domineering person. This reader would probably also agree with a critic who says that “Mitty has a wife who embodies the authority of a society in which the husband cannot function” (Lindner 440). She could see the faults in a relationship that is too controlled by a woman and recognize that a man needs to feel important and dominant in his relationship with his wife. It could be said that the female reader would agree completely with Thurber’s portrayal of the domineering wife. The female reader could simply misread the text.

Or, the female reader could rebel against the text. She could see Mrs. Mitty as a woman who is trying to do her best to keep her husband well and cared for. She could see Walter as a man with a fleeting grip on reality who daydreams that he is a fighter pilot, a brilliant surgeon, a gun expert, or a military hero, when he actually is a poor driver with a slow reaction time to a green traffic light. The female reader could read critics of Thurber who say that by allowing his wife to dominate him, Mitty becomes a “non-hero in a civilization in which women are winning the battle of the sexes” (Hasley 533) and become angry that a woman’s fight for equality is seen merely as a battle between the sexes. She could read Walter’s daydreams as his attempt to dominate his wife, since all of his fantasies center on him in traditional roles of power. This, for most women, would cause anger at Mitty (and indirectly Thurber) for creating and promoting a society which believes that women need to stay subservient to men. From a male point of view, it becomes a battle of the sexes. In a woman’s eyes, her reading is simply a struggle for equality within the text and in the world outside that the text reflects.

It is certain that women misread “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.” I did. I found myself initially wishing that Mrs. Mitty would just let Walter daydream in peace. But after reading the story again and paying attention to the portrayal of Mrs. Mitty, I realized that it is imperative that women rebel against the texts that would oppress them. By misreading a text, the woman reader understands it in a way that is conventional and acceptable to the literary world. But in so doing, she is also distancing herself from the text, not fully embracing it or its meaning in her life. By rebelling against the text, the female reader not only has to understand the point of view of the author and the male audience, but she also has to formulate her own opinions and create a sort of dialogue between the text and herself. Rebelling against the text and the stereotypes encourages an active dialogue between the woman and the text which, in turn, guarantees an active and (most likely) angry reader response. I became a resisting reader.
Works Cited


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Introduction to Critical Theory

The practice of literary theory became a profession in the 20th century, but it has historical roots as far back as ancient Greece (Aristotle’s *Poetics* is an often cited early example), ancient India (Bharata Muni’s *Natya Shastra*), ancient Rome (Longinus’s *On the Sublime*) and medieval Iraq (Al-Jahiz’s *al-Bayan wa-‘l-tabyin and al-Hayawan*, and ibn al-Mu’tazz’s *Kitab al-Badi*). The aesthetic theories of philosophers from ancient philosophy through the 18th and 19th centuries are important influences on current literary study. The theory and criticism of literature are, of course, also closely tied to the history of literature.

The modern sense of “literary theory,” however, dates only to approximately the 1950s, when the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure began strongly to influence English language literary criticism. The New Critics and various European-influenced formalists (particularly the Russian Formalists) had described some of their more abstract efforts as “theoretical” as well. But it was not until the broad impact of structuralism began to be felt in the English-speaking academic world that “literary theory” was thought of as a unified domain.

In the academic world of the United Kingdom and the United States, literary theory was at its most popular from the late 1960s (when its influence was beginning to spread outward from elite universities like Johns Hopkins, Yale, and Cornell) through the 1980s (by which time it was taught nearly everywhere in some form).

By the early 1990s, the popularity of “theory” as a subject of interest by itself was declining slightly even as the texts of literary theory were incorporated into the study of almost all literature.

About

One of the fundamental questions of literary theory is “what is literature?” – although many contemporary theorists and literary scholars believe either that “literature” cannot be defined or that it can refer to any use of language. Specific theories are distinguished not only by their methods and
conclusions, but even by how they define a “text.”

There are many types of literary theory, which take different approaches to texts. Even among those listed below, combine methods from more than one of these approaches (for instance, the deconstructive approach of Paul de Man drew on a long tradition of close reading pioneered by the New Critics, and de Man was trained in the European hermeneutic tradition).

Broad schools of theory that have historically been important include historical and biographical criticism, New Criticism, formalism, Russian formalism, and structuralism, post-structuralism, Marxism, feminism and French feminism, post-colonialism, new historicism, deconstruction, reader-response criticism, and psychoanalytic criticism.

Schools of Literary Theory

Listed below are some of the most commonly identified schools of literary theory, along with their major authors. In many cases, such as those of the historian and philosopher Michel Foucault and the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the authors were not primarily literary critics, but their work has been broadly influential in literary theory.

- Aestheticism – often associated with Romanticism, a philosophy defining aesthetic value as the primary goal in understanding literature. This includes both literary critics who have tried to understand and/or identify aesthetic values and those like Oscar Wilde who have stressed art for art’s sake.
  - Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, Harold Bloom American
- pragmatism and other American approaches
  - Harold Bloom, Stanley Fish, Richard Rorty
- Cognitive Cultural Studies – applies research in cognitive neuroscience, cognitive evolutionary psychology and anthropology, and philosophy of mind to the study of literature and culture
  - Frederick Luis Aldama, Mary Thomas Crane, Nancy Easterlin, William Flesch, David Herman, Suzanne Keen, Patrick Colm Hogan, Alan Richardson, Ellen Spolsky, Blakey Vermeule, Lisa Zunshine
- Cultural studies – emphasizes the role of literature in everyday life
  - Raymond Williams, Dick Hebdige, and Stuart Hall (British Cultural Studies); Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno; Michel de Certeau; also Paul Gilroy, John Guillory
- Darwinian literary studies – situates literature in the context of evolution and natural selection
- Deconstruction – a strategy of “close” reading that elicits the ways that key terms and concepts may be paradoxical or self-undermining, rendering their meaning undecidable
  - Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Gayatri Spivak, Avital Ronell
- Gender (see feminist literary criticism) – which emphasizes themes of gender relations Luce
  - Irigaray, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Elaine Showalter
• Formalism – a school of literary criticism and literary theory having mainly to do with structural purposes of a particular text
• German hermeneutics and philology
  ○ Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Erich Auerbach, René Wellek
• Marxism (see Marxist literary criticism) – which emphasizes themes of class conflict
  ○ Georg Lukács, Valentin Voloshinov, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin
• Modernism
• New Criticism – looks at literary works on the basis of what is written, and not at the goals of the author or biographical issues
  ○ W. K. Wimsatt, F. R. Leavis, John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren
• New Historicism – which examines the work through its historical context and seeks to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature
  ○ Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Jonathan Goldberg, H. Aram Veeser
• Postcolonialism – focuses on the influences of colonialism in literature, especially regarding the historical conflict resulting from the exploitation of less developed countries and indigenous peoples by Western nations
  ○ Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Declan Kiberd
• Postmodernism – criticism of the conditions present in the twentieth century, often with concern for those viewed as social deviants or the Other
  ○ Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari and Maurice Blanchot
• Post-structuralism – a catch-all term for various theoretical approaches (such as deconstruction) that criticize or go beyond Structuralism’s aspirations to create a rational science of culture by extrapolating the model of linguistics to other discursive and aesthetic formations
  ○ Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva

Psychoanalysis (see psychoanalytic literary criticism) – explores the role of consciousnesses and the unconscious in literature including that of the author, reader, and characters in the text

  Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Harold Bloom, Slavoj Žižek, Viktor Tausk

Queër theory – examines, questions, and criticizes the role of gender identity and sexuality in literature

  Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michel Foucault

Reader-response criticism – focuses upon the active response of the reader to a text Louise Rosenblatt, Wolfgang Iser, Norman Holland, Hans-Robert Jauss, Stuart Hall

Russian formalism
  ○
○ Victor Shklovsky, Vladimir Propp

- Structuralism and semiotics (see semiotic literary criticism) – examines the universal underlying structures in a text, the linguistic units in a text and how the author conveys meaning through any structures
  - Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Mikhail Bakhtin, Yurii Lotman, Umberto Eco, Jacques Ehrmann, Northrop Frye and morphology of folklore

- Eco-criticism – explores cultural connections and human relationships to the natural world
- Other theorists: Robert Graves, Alamgir Hashmi, John Sutherland, Leslie Fiedler, Kenneth Burke, Paul Bénichou, Barbara Johnson, Blanca de Lizaur, Dr Seuss

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New Criticism

New Criticism was a formalist movement in literary theory that dominated American literary criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century. It emphasized close reading, particularly of poetry, to discover how a work of literature functioned as a self-contained, self-referential aesthetic object. The movement derived its name from John Crowe Ransom’s 1941 book *The New Criticism*. Also very influential were the critical essays of T. S. Eliot, such as “Tradition and the Individual Talent” and “Hamlet and His Problems,” in which Eliot developed his notion of the “objective correlative.” Eliot’s evaluative judgments, such as his condemnation of Milton and Shelley, his liking for the so-called metaphysical poets and his insistence that poetry must be impersonal, greatly influenced the formation of the New Critical canon.

New Criticism developed as a reaction to the older philological and literary history schools of the US North, which, influenced by nineteenth-century German scholarship, focused on the history and meaning of individual words and their relation to foreign and ancient languages, comparative sources, and the biographical circumstances of the authors. These approaches, it was felt, tended to distract from the text and meaning of a poem and entirely neglect its aesthetic qualities in favor of teaching about external factors. On the other hand, the literary appreciation school, which limited itself to pointing out the “beauties” and morally elevating qualities of the text, was disparaged by the New Critics as too subjective and emotional. Condemning this as a version of Romanticism, they aimed for newer, systematic and objective method. For an overview, see Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analyzed separately. In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed to exclude the reader’s response, the author’s intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias from their analysis.

The hey-day of the New Criticism in American high schools and colleges was the Cold War decades between 1950 and the mid-seventies, doubtless because it offered a relatively straightforward and politically uncontroversial approach to the teaching of literature. Brooks and Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* and *Understanding Fiction* both became staples during this era.

Studying a passage of prose or poetry in New Critical style required careful, exacting scrutiny of the passage itself. Formal elements such as rhyme, meter, setting, characterization, and plot were used to
identify the theme of the text. In addition to the theme, the New Critics also looked for paradox, ambiguity, irony, and tension to help establish the single best and most unified interpretation of the text.

Although the New Criticism is no longer a dominant theoretical model in American universities, some of its methods (like close reading) are still fundamental tools of literary criticism, underpinning a number of subsequent theoretic approaches to literature including poststructuralism, deconstruction theory, and reader-response theory.

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Multicultural Societies Explained

Click here to view the presentation “Multicultural Societies Explained” by Amendor As and Åse Elin Langeland, from NDLA.
Chapter 5: Creation Myths

Native Voices Video

The Annenberg Learner series *American Passages* is a web-based literature class. Its resources include videos, links, and comprehension questions. The chapter on Native American mythology is particularly good, as is the chapter/video on the Gothic. Unit 1 there is entitled “Resistance and Renewal in Native Literature.” View the video.

Native Voices Video Questions

Review the following questions. Several of them bring up the themes that recur in the course readings. Be prepared to answer any of these questions after viewing the American Passages video *Native Voices*.

1. What is the relationship between Native American identity and American identity?
2. How does Native American literature reflect or help create a sense of what it means to be Native American in the United States?
3. What does this literature help reveal about the experience of having a multicultural identity?
4. How does the conception of American Indian identity depend upon the writer’s identity?
5. What makes Native American traditions from different regions distinctive?
6. How has Native American literature been influenced by politics on and off the reservation?
7. How are Native American oral traditions shaped by the landscapes in which they are composed?
8. What role does the land play in oral tradition?
9. How does the notion of time in American Indian narratives compare with notions of time in Western cultures?
10. How does the chronology of particular narratives reflect differing notions of time?
11. How do Yellow Woman stories and the Nightway or Enemyway chant influence Leslie Marmon Silko’s Ceremony and Storyteller?
12. How do Navajo chantways influence the poetry of Luci Tapahonso?
13. How does the Ghost Dance influence the vision of Black Elk?
14. How does the Ghost Dance challenge nineteenth-century European American notions of Manifest Destiny?
15. How do Yellow Woman stories subvert the genre of captivity narratives?
16. How do the poems of Simon J. Ortiz challenge the notion of what it means to be an American hero?
Napi Stories

Read at least three of the Blackfoot legends and myths on the linked site and post about them in your discussion board. Be sure to cite specifics from each. You’d include an in-text citation with the title of the myth, shortened and put into quotes, in the parentheses.

http://www.native-languages.org/napi.htm Public domain content

Seneca, The Origin of Stories

The following link from blogger Linda Tate contains both an audio version and other links to the Seneca myth “Origin of Folk Stories.” Like many myths, it orders the world while providing a narrative backing for how things came to be. It can be read metaphorically, with physical events in the narrative corresponding to mental events/struggles as well. (Metaphor, remember, is an identification of two unlike things, so it requires a lot from readers.)

Obviously, there are symbols in the myth as well as connections to contemporary culture. An interesting one with this myth is the fact that the villagers are fickle and very much focused on personal appearances. The point is that we have much more in common, culturally, than we might suspect. Read flexibly, marking up your text.

A Seneca Tale: “The Origin of Stories”

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Gáqga’, A Trickster Tale

Trickster tales are often told to establish the origin of an item or custom, or to impart a moral message. Review this Seneca story from Jeremiah Curtin’s 1889 collection, *Seneca Indian Myths* (republished in 1922). Consider how this relates to our unit discussion topics and the course objectives.

GÁQGA´

Characters

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RAVEN was traveling but he didn’t know whence he came or whither he was going. As he journeyed along he was thinking, “How did I come to be alive? Where did I come from? Where am I going?” After traveling a long time he saw a smoke and going toward it saw four hunters—blackbirds. Afraid to go near them he hid in the forest and watched.

The next morning after the hunters had started away, Raven crept up to their camp, stole their meat, carried it into the woods and made a camp for himself. He was lonely and he said, “I wish there were other people here.” Looking around he saw a house west of his camp and going to it found Robin and his wife and five children. Raven ate the youngest child, then ate the other four. The father and mother tried to drive him away, but could not. When at last Raven went off he left old Rabin and his wife crying for their children.

Sometime after this, Raven saw a camp off in the southeast and going there found a family of Sparrows. He was afraid of the old people and he ran off, but they followed him, caught up and hit him on the head till they drove him far away.

“It is a shame to let such little people beat me!” thought Raven. But he was afraid to go back.

Now Raven had gone far from his camp; he hunted everywhere in the forest but couldn’t find it. “Well,” said he at last, “let it go, I don’t care!” and he walked away toward the North. Just before dark, he found a camp and going towards it saw four men and a large quantity of meat. He hid in the forest and the next morning, looking toward the camp, he again saw the hunters.

“I’ll wait till they go away,” thought Raven, “then I’ll steal their meat.” Soon he heard the men moving around, then all was quiet and he knew that they had gone. He crept slowly toward the camp, but when he reached it he didn’t find even one bite of meat—they were the hunters from whom he had stolen before. They had finished hunting, had packed their meat and started for home.
Raven was disappointed. He walked on and toward night found another camp. Creeping near it, he again saw the four hunters. He listened to what they were saying.

One said, “I wonder who stole our meat that day?”

Another said, “I think the thief is walking around in the woods, I think his name is Raven.”

“Oh,” thought Raven, “they are talking about me. They will be on the watch. How can I get their meat? Then he said, “Let them fall asleep and sleep soundly!”

That minute the four hunters fell asleep. Raven went up boldly, took their meat, carried it off into the woods and hid it, saying, “This is the kind of man I am!”

The next morning the four hunters missed their meat. One said, “Somebody has stolen my meat!”

Another asked, “Who has stolen my meat?”

The third said, “I dreamed that I saw Raven around here and he started off toward the Southwest.” Then the four said, “Let us follow the direction given by the dream.”

The hunters started to follow the thief. Soon they came to the place where he was camped. Raven had been out all night and now he was sleeping soundly.

One of the men said, “We must kill him.”

“No,” said another, “let him live, he didn’t kill us while we were asleep.” They took their meat and went away.

When Raven woke up, he was very hungry, but the meat was gone. “Well,” thought he, “I must hunt for something to eat.” He traveled around in every direction but found no game. About midday he heard the noise of people. He listened a while then went on till he came to a house. A man inside the house was singing and the song said, “Raven is coming! Look out! Be careful! Raven is coming!”

“Why does he sing about me?” thought Raven, “I’ll go in and find out.”

He went into the house and found Ground-bird and his wife and four children. “I have come to stay a few days with you,” said Raven.

“Very well,” said the man.

That night Raven ate the four children, then he lay down and slept.

The next morning the father and mother asked, “Where are our children?”

Raven said, “I dreamed that a man came and carried your children off, and my dream told me which way he went. I will go with you and hunt for them.”
When the three had traveled some distance Raven said, “The man who stole your children lives on that high cliff over there. I can’t go there with you, for I don’t like that man. I will wait here till you come back.”

As soon as the father and mother were out of sight, Raven ran off. He traveled till he came to where there were many of his own people. They were dancing and he sat down to watch them.

Soon Muck-worm was seen coming from the East. The people stopped dancing and ran in every direction, but Muck-worm pursued them and catching one after another by the neck he threw them aside dead.

Raven, who was watching, thought, “What sort of man is that? I wish he would see me. He can’t throw me off dead, in that way.”

Muck-worm, after killing many of the Raven people, started toward the West, Raven followed him. Muck-worm kept on for a long time without seeming to know that there was anyone behind him, but at last he stopped, looked back, and asked, “What do you want?”

“I don’t want anything,” said Raven, “I’ve come to be company for you.” “I don’t want company,” said Muck-worm.

Raven was frightened. Both men stood still for a minute then Muck-worm sprang at Raven and caught him. He would have killed him, but Raven screamed so loudly that many of his people heard the cry and came to his aid. They flew at Muck-worm and pecked him to death.

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Navajo Origin Myth

“Navajo Origin Legend” [It is Mythology, so I Renamed This]


The first (lowest) world was red, bare, barren ground, this was the earliest world. Etséhostin and Etséasun, his wife, existed there and they had nothing to eat till the fourth day, and on this day they began to think of eating. Hostjaishjiné stood up and rubbed his belly and some skin (*bitcoin*) was loosened which formed in a roll under his hands and he laid this roll of cuticle on the ground. The woman stood up and followed his example. Then they each trampled on the rolls. Etséhostin reached over his shoulder, down his back, and formed another roll and laid it on the ground. The two rolls that he had formed turned into a man with a mask. This new-formed man stood up, and this is the origin of the first man (Navajo ?). Etséasun again followed the hostin’s example and from the rolls which she formed a woman arose: this was the virgin called Djosdelhazhy (biting vagina). The hostin (old man) then reached under his right arm and formed another roll of skin which he placed upon his right side and formed another roll of skin which, being laid upon the ground, became Usheenasun, Salt spirit, a woman who now lives at Nitcō (Salt Lake south of Zuñi).

Hostin then took the end of his tongue between his fingers and spat out a little piece of it (his tongue ? spittle ?) upon the ground before him and it became a man with a mask. The wind would shake this wing and tell everything in his ear. Etséasun then took a roll of skin from her scalp and laid it on the ground and placed a little feather beside it and this became the Thunder (with wings). On the left side the feathers were black on top and white underneath, on the right side the feathers were white above and black below. Etséhostin then rubbed the sole of his right foot and the roll of skin became a large frog, Tcalc. He rubbed the sole of his left foot, and a crane, Teklaliale was formed. This makes altogether twelve personages up to this time.

Etséhostin began thinking, “How can we get something to eat?” Etséasun said, “My husband, I know not.” Hostin looked back and saw Hostjaishjiné and said to him, “You understand these things, tell us how we are to get food.” Hostjaishjiné, who always looks stern and grim and angry, said, “I do not know,” but he reached down on his neck and rolled a little skin in his hand and Wunushtcindy (locust ?) was produced. Then Etséasun looked far back and saw Nastjeasun and asked her how they could get something to eat. Nastjeasun rolled a little skin upon her breast and it became Ant, Nâzozi, which was then buried in the ground for four days and at the end of that time many little red (yellow) ants came forth. Hostjaishjiné then rolled some skin from his forehead and laid it on the ground when it turned into a horned toad, Nâshöngbitcijy. Etséhostin built a house and lived there and the red (yellow) ants built all round this big house, and annoyed him and the others, so that they could find no rest day or night. Teholtsody thought he would go off and find some place to rest so he travelled to the east. The world was very small at this time, and Teholtsody soon came to its utmost limit and as he could go no farther, he built his house there. In like manner, the frog being troubled with the ants, he travelled to the south to the utmost limit of the world, and built there. Then Salt Woman went similarly to the west and built a house, and Tulthklahallé went to the north. Each of these houses was fashioned from east to
west like a rainbow (shabiklo), and from south to north of Sun-rays (jónâaibikloth), when we build a house today we have four poles reaching from east west and from south to north, and these meet at the apex.

After these four had left him Etséhostin stayed in his own house. He said, “I wish we could get some clouds, I want rain,” and he looked out of his house towards the East, where Teholtsody was and saw many clouds, for Teholtsody’s house is of clouds. Etséasun then said, “I wish we had some kind of rain,” and she looked to the south and saw a heavy fog, for this was the frog’s house. Etséhostin wished that there was a mountain to stand on and look for rain, and he began to pray for rain; he looked west and saw a mirage, Hûtaonige, like a person. Etséasun now prayed on the north side, “Send rain so that everything may be wet.” She saw a green scum on the water and made a house, ‘Tutklit’hogan, of this. This makes four houses.

Etséhostin sent Thunder naked to the cloud house of Teholtsody in the east, telling Thunder to stand right in the doorway of Teholtsody’s house. Thunder went there and stood in the doorway naked and Teholtsody gave him a mantle of feathers which is the sheet (quick) lightning. On his head is the heat lightning. He had a tail feather which is Hajillkish, sheet lightning. Etséasun told the monster Tehlin (horn horse) to go to the south to Frog’s house of fog. He went and stood in the doorway. Salt Woman had gone west and Etséhostin told Thonainilly to stand just outside the doorway of her house and watch her. He was to be her guardian. An old woman sat on the north side of the world and she sent a fish (turtle) to watch outside the doorway of Tultklehale’s house and guard it. After Teholtsody went east he made a water vessel (tositsa) of white clay. Frog in the south made one of blue clay; the Usheenasun in the west made one of yellow clay. Tultklehale on the north made one of spotted clay. It had variegated surface of black, blue, yellow and white.

Etséhostin began to travel and he went to Teholtsody’s house, and in the middle of it he found the pot Teholtsody had made and it was covered. He lifted the cover and found it full of water. He went home and told his wife that Teholtsody was growing wiser than they were. Etséasun then went south to Frog’s house and saw his pot full of water, and she returned to her house and told her husband. Jøsdelhazhy said she also would travel and she went west and found that Salt Woman also had a pot full of water. She returned and told what she had seen. Hashjaishjine then went north and found a pot of water in the house of Tultklehale and he returned very angry. He said, “They are all getting wiser than us. They are growing rich and we are still poor. We have nothing and cannot make anything.” Etséhostin said, “Why should you be angry? We will grow wise like them and have many things some day.” Then Etséhostin went to Teholtsody’s house to get a little water, which he brought back to his own house. Etséasun went and brought some from the south. Next Hostin borrowed some from the west and Asun borrowed from the north. Having brought water from each of these four places Hostin planted it all together in the ground. In a few days he saw a damp, green spot there. He returned to look at the place in a few more days and saw that bushes had grown there. He made a third visit and found jointed grass. He made a fourth visit and found the reed grass, looka (arrow grass, tluka) but it had no pollen on the top, and there was a large spring also. Hostin again said, “I wish we had something more,” and he went to the spring and found lookaitso growing right in the centre of it. Five different kinds of plants grew out of the spring and he pulled up some of each kind and took them home. One of these reeds had twelve joints and the wind came out of the other end and made music (a flageolet). The wind emerging from this reed whirled about on the ground all over the world and it went to the houses at the four quarters and caused them much trouble. The dweller at each house sent his guard out to trouble the wind. They took black clouds, fogs, and blue mould, also to each of them was given Thunder and Lightning and the guardians kept shooting at the little winds but these latter kept dodging about so that they could not be
hit. But this only raised more wind and it rained heavily, then the guards stopped troubling the wind for they could not conquer it.

When the rain stopped Hostin said to his wife, “Everything looks beautiful, I wish we had something good to eat.” He looked in all directions and saw Hajillkish (Glow-light Heat-Lightning) at the four points where people lived. Then he prayed for some kind of grass, or fruit, or seeds to live upon. He went to the spring and saw something green that had come up out of the ground and it was corn. He then went east to Teholtsody and found the pumpkin and squash and returned. Asun went south and found that Frog had raised watermelon and tobacco. She returned. Then Hostin went west to Salt Woman’s house and found beans p. 91 and cotton growing; then she returned home. Hostin went north to Tulthkle’s house and found muskmelon and gourds growing in great quantities. He then returned and said to Asun, “We have wished for these things (i.e. we have everything we prayed for). Now we have many things. Let us pray for something more.” So he prayed and sang for more.

He went to the spring and saw a “fruit” in the middle of the water. He went back for Spider Woman and told her to get this fruit out of the water. She got it and gave it to Hostin who looked at it and saw it was Yolakaihatate, a big shell, big as a pan. He took this home and returned next day to the spring and found more fruit. Spider Woman again brought it out and it was Turquoise, Tedokiji. Hostin then went east to Teholtsody’s house and went in and found a big black bow and arrow, also eagle feathers. These Hostin used as Thunder (the arrow for lightning, and the feathers to guide the arrows). Asun sent south to Frog’s house, and Frog had stone knives (paishhathl). Spider Woman went to Salt Woman who had planted cotton and had been weaving it into cloth. Spider Woman got this and brought it home. Hashjaishjine went north to Tulthkle’s house and found black cloth and fetched it home. On the first trip Hashjaishjine returned angry but this time he was in good humor. He said to Hostin, “The people at the four corners are growing rich.” Hostin then prayed for more and went to the spring. The corn was growing ripe and each stalk carried twelve ears. Asun went over and gathered it and brought it home.

They now had plenty of corn and much else besides. But those living at the four corners of the world had no corn so they came to Hostin’s house and begged him for some. He told them to provide for themselves, but finally he gave them some of the pollen (taditin), but none of the ear corn. He told them to plant the pollen. They did so and it grew up small, like onions, but no ears grew upon it. Then they begged Hostin for some seed corn but he would not give them any. Teholtsody said, “When Hostin came borrowing water we all gave him some, and enabled him to raise water of his own.” Hostin said, “Surely you let me have water and when you begged for corn I gave it to you and taught you how to plant it as best I could.” Teholtsody was very angry and thought how he could destroy Hostin. Teholtsody gave Thunder a bow and arrow and told him to go and kill Hostin, “for,” said he, “we must have some of this corn.” Thunder went “to try and burst Hostin open with lightning,” but Horned Toad was in the doorway of Hostin’s house and the wind warned Hostin of his danger. Hostin told Horned Toad to stand in front of him always, for as he was so rough-coated lightning could not hurt him. Frog was also angry and assaulted Hostin. He sent his guardian Tehlinl (a water monster) to draw all the water away (to dry it up) from Hostin’s spring. But Spider Woman wove an impenetrable web around it so that Frog and his guardian were foiled. (Hostjaishkine was the most powerful). Salt Woman gave Tiaininilly a lump p. 92 (double handful) of salt, and he also had some kind of lightning in his hands, and he came against Hostin. Hostjaishjine saw him coming and knew his harmful intent. Hostjaishjine had a long stone knife with a wooden handle. He ran into the house and made a fire by twirling a spindle of wood, etc. He made a small fire and scattered it all over Hostin’s house. Tiaininilly (a young man) came close in order to throw his lightning on to the house and his salt upon the fire, which exploded, but no harm ensued, so he went back to the west and the Salt Woman was powerless. Tultklahale, in the north, sent Mud Turtle (Black-mud Fish) to harm Hostin. Turtle had some kind of lightning of arrow, but could do no
harm. Hastjaishjine made a big shirt of rawhide and gave it to Wunustcinde (locust) and this protected him against the lightning or arrows of the Turtle; no impression could be made on this shirt, and this is the origin of the shield. Hastjaishjine saw that all these people were jealous of the Hostin and were trying to destroy him. They were envious of his possessing corn, etc.). Hostin then asked Hastjaishjini to do what he could against these people. Hashjaishjini’s anger was roused against these people and he sallied forth to their houses. He went first to east, then south, then west, then north. He broke open their houses and successively broke the pot and spilled the water that was in them. The water that was in the pot in the east flowed to the south and the water that was in the pot in the north flowed toward the west, and all the waters met in the west and there was a great flood. Hostin had corn, white shells, turquoise and everything he wanted. He had large hollow reeds which would float on the water so he did not care when the flood should reach him. But all these eight persons who were envious and at enmity with Hostin were troubled and afraid of the flood. Hostin and his people were not afraid as they had the means of floating on the water.

Hostin and his family cut the great reeds and put all their corn and other possessions inside of these, and the whole world was gradually overflowed. Then Teholtsoody and the others at the cardinal points began to wish that they could save themselves with Hostin and his family. Teholtsoody made a bow and arrow and gave them to Thunder and told him to go to Hostin and give them to him and beg that there might be peace between them. Thunder went to Hostin’s house and said, “Teholtsoody sends you this bow and arrow and begs you to be his friend.” Hostin would not look at them and said, “I have nothing to do with it. Go to Hostjaishjine. He is the one that broke the water vessels and brought on this flood.” So Thunder took them to Hostjaishjine and made the same offer. Hostjaishjine would not listen to Thunder but said, “Go to Wunustcinde” (locust). Thunder went to him and he accepted the bow and arrow saying, “This is just what I want.” There were two arrows and Wunustcinde thrust them into his breast, one at either side, and drew them completely through. You may see that this insect has the holes in its thorax to this day. Then he put them in his mouth and p. 93 thrust them down his throat into his stomach and withdrew them again, and there was blood adhering to them.

Next Frog sent Teklin to Hostin to say, “My house is overflowed and have lost everything except this tobacco bag which I wish you to accept that we may become friends.” The bag was made from the green scum of the water and was embroidered with beads, etc. Hostin would not have it and referred him to Hostjaishjine who breathed upon it four times and there was some tobacco in it and he filled a clay pipe with it and smoked.

Next Salt Woman said, “We shall be killed by the water, we cannot live here, let us go to Hostin.” She had a cotton blanket (naskan) and offered this through Tunelini (Salt Woman’s guard) to Hostin. He would not have it, and said, “Go to Spider Woman and give her the blanket.” She looked at it, put it around her waist, breathed from it four times and was satisfied. Next came Hakleale (Fish Guardian) who sent fish Hostin with a flint shirt and cap. He offered them, but Hostin sent him to second man (Nacûiditcije, Horned Toad). He took the shirt and cap, put the shirt on and wore the cap, and therefore all four groups (eight people) were now on peaceable terms with Hostin.

They were all friends. They stayed there a while but everything was flooded except on the east side. Little white mountains showed above the water. On the south side were little blue mountains; on the west side, little yellow mountains; on the north, little black mountains. All just barely showed their heads above water. Hostin went east to White mountains and picked up a little earth and returned. Spider Woman wove a web on the surface of the water near each of the four mountains. Hostin had a house of rainbow and sun rays in the form of a little mountain and he covered it with earth for a roof.
The water had not yet covered the houses. Spider Woman wove a web so that the spring could not overflow yet. Old Man (Hostin) and Woman (Asun) went over to the spring and planted every growing thing, corn, melons, pumpkins, beans, all things, and they got all kinds of seeds and put them away. Those living in the various directions owned their water and had it with them. After the restoration of peace, Old Woman made new vessels for all these people in which they carried their water supply. When they made peace and were all united, the flood continued, so they put all their corn and property in the reeds and got inside themselves. All these people were inside the reeds and the water kept rising. Old Man and Woman went down to the spring. Old Man got on one side, Old Woman, on the other. He began to pray: “We are going to leave the spring, we will never come back again, but wherever I go I will always live as I have done here, do everything as I have done here.”

When he finished praying, a young man came out of the spring and a little afterwards another. They did not look at the boys closely, but Old Woman took them in her arms and folded her blanket around them and went to the reeds. They made a hole in the reed in the side of the shaft and the people got inside and Old Man went in last, but Wunustcinde (locust) got up to the top of the reed and sat upon a leaf. As the reed began to move upward Wunustcinde began to make a noise through the holes in his thorax and as he did so the reed began to shake like wind. Black Wind shook it at the roots and made it move. The reed grew up higher and higher. The water now covered an the earth, everything except this reed which kept growing and Wunustcinde was always on the leaf at the top. As the reed grew, the water continued to rise; as Wunustcinde made his noise, the reed kept growing and Black Wind kept blowing at the roots and the people became aware that they were close to the roof of the world and did not know what to do as there was no space left for them between the surface of the water and the under side of this earth. Wunustcinde stopped his noise and Black Wind stopped blowing, and the reed stopped growing. They did not know what to do. Old Man then said to him of the north, “You begged me to bring you along, now come with me to look around and see if there is any way to get out of this world.” But they could not find a hole anywhere nor any way to get out. They were frightened and thought they would all die there. But the Spider Woman wove a web on the surface of the water. It floated like a raft and an the people got out and sat upon it. They were puzzled what to do. Hostjaishjine picked up his peshhath (stone knife) and began to bore a hole in the roof over them. It was of clay which dropped and crumbled and when he could go no farther he called Wunustcinde to try, who soon bored a small hole through and came out upon the new world, but the water coming up through the hole which he had made was like to flood the new world also, so he stopped the hole up with mud.

No one saw him there as yet. Then he saw the water rising up from east, south, west, and north. He made the noise with his thorax. He saw a swan on the south side making much noise and the water was all in motion. Wunustcinde made such noise that the swan from the east, also one from the north and one from the west came to him. All four came to him but did not know what to think of him. They asked him where he came from. He told them from the world below. They would not believe him so he told them how he had come. The swans told him that neither he nor his people should come to this new place for it belonged to the swans only, and they would not let anyone else live here. Wunustcinde had a hard time with the swans, and they fought him. Finally they said, “If you want to stay here you must pay us.” So Wunustcinde returned to his people and told them all this. Wunustcinde had the red substance that causes the sun to set red when it is going to storm and he offered this to the swans for their land. They put it on their wings and were so much pleased with it they said, “Well now, you can come and live here.” Wunustcinde said to them that some of his people could not live in the water, although some of them could. Then the swans said p. 95 that after four days there would be some dry land. The swans had pots of clay and they placed one on the east side, one on the north side, one on the west side and in this way they carried off some of the water, and made some dry land. When the others came up to the
new world they built little round houses again of the same red substance that had been given to the swans.

First Man made a man called Hosjelti and placed him on San Francisco Mountain; another called Hosjogwan (?) who lives on Ute Mountains; another called Navesrhu (Nagenezgruni) who lives on Navajo Mountain; another called Hoshjaishjine who lives on San Mateo Mountain, These four own all the game and other animals on these mountains. Old Man’s people however lived close together. They took the earth gathered from the four mountains in the lower world and again they formed mountains as in lower world, at east, white; at south, blue; at west, yellow; at north, black. No one was allowed to see the boys who were found at the spring; they were left at the Ute Mountains when the people first came up. Old Man had brought seeds of all kinds with him and planted everything that grows, vegetables, plants, timber, sagebrush, flowers, everything. He found lots of people here who joined him. That was when bears, deer, antelope, rabbit, birds, all kinds of animals were people.

They (Old Man ?) made a white blanket for sunrise over Ute Mt., east; a blue blanket for the south sky, over San Mateo Mt., south; a yellow blanket for sunset over San Francisco Mt., west; a black blanket for Navajo Mt., north. There had been neither day nor night in the lower world, only sufficient light for existence. Old Man now said, “Let us arrange to have day and night, a time for work and a time for sleep,” and so we see it is today. Just before sunrise comes a white streak in the east. Then the yellow of sunset and the white of the east meet in the middle so as to give light enough to work. And when the blue and the black meet in the middle this way it makes night, the time for sleep.

Then Old Man and Old Woman said, “We have nobody to talk to about ourselves (to worship us).” Old Man went off to the east to find people, or same as soon as they reached the upper world went toward the east. Old Man followed after these, and from east they brought back eagle feathers; from west, hawk feathers; from south, blue feathers; from north, speckled feathers (of whip-poor-will, night bird). When they got these altogether they laid them before them. Beside east feather they laid white corn and white shell; beside west feather, yellow corn and abalone shell; beside south feather, blue corn, and turquoise; beside north feather, all kinds of corn and shells and turquoise. All four were laid out together. Old man arranged all these for singing and praying to these things as he did at the spring, singing and praying. He and Old Woman and all his people moved about walking over these things several times in ceremonial manner.

East feather was for the wolf. The feather and corn and shell were prayed over and a wolf was raised. They prayed over the west objects, and Mountain Lion was raised; they prayed over the south objects and Tabastin, Otter, was raised; they prayed over the north objects, Bud (sic!) Beaver was raised. Old man said, “We need rulers,” and he made these four rulers over these several regions. He planted all vegetable things and sprinkled them with the earth of the four mountains to give them power. These mountains had much wild tobacco growing on them. The four animals were the rulers of all the land. They smoked and felt good and began to teach the people to be farmers, to plant corn, wheat, melons, pumpkins, beans, chile, etc. and how to irrigate and take care of their crops. All four (animals) taught the people to use all kinds of grasses, timber, etc.

Old Man and Old Woman again talked about how they should get some more people, and they worked hard and made people. Joshdelhashi assisted them. She rubbed down the skin on her arms, and put the roll of cuticle on the ground, and it became a man (Repeat for various parts of the body, as in the first world, until twelve people are made).
They made six men and six women, and the offspring of these twelve people are all pueblo Indians, Moki, Oraibi, Zuñi, etc. men who cut their hair across the front of the face. When the white streak of daylight, the white of the east, met the yellow of sunset in mid heavens, and after they had each returned to their place (as they do daily) the white of the east had offspring which was Coyote, and the yellow of the west a yellow fox. The blue and black met in mid heaven and returning had issue — the blue, a blue fox, and the black, a badger. On the east side is Coyote; on the west, Yellow Fox; on the south, Blue Fox; on the north, Badger.

The Coyote of the east came where the people were and asked Old Man where he came from. Old Man told him from three worlds down below and also told Coyote how he came up, also saying “If you (Coyote) are a clever man, I will teach you all we know about our religion, etc.” So he taught him everything. Coyote got to know a great deal, and went off to the Ute Mountains and got on the summit and commenced howling and making all sorts of noises. Old man had Guardian Wind and Wind went to Coyote and asked him what he was yelling about, and Coyote said, “It is none of your business.” Coyote said he belonged to Old Man and had learned how to do everything, and that no roaring of the wind could frighten him. Wind said, “Keep on then, see if Old Man will not make a living without (after) you.” Coyote said, “He will have to do more than he has been doing then.” Coyote went back to Old Man and told him lies about the wind.

Blue and Yellow Foxes went together to the pueblos and belong to them. Coyote and Badger belong to the Navajos, but Great Wolf was the chief (ruler) of the whole. He gets up at daybreak, stands in the midst of the people’s dwellings and calls to the people to go to work in the fields. He advises them to get early to work planting corn, gardening and irrigating.  

He had a very smart woman for a wife and they had two children. After a time this woman made herself three small sticks for gambling and would go off all day long and leave the children helpless. Late in the afternoon Wolf chief, the man, came home and saw the state of the hogan, untidy, and one of the children lying in the ashes of the fireplace. He did not try to clean up for he was very tired and lay down. At sunset his wife came back with her sticks but she had gambled away everything she had. Then the husband expostulated with her on her conduct. She replied tartly that he could stay and take care of the hogan and children as he had nothing to do. He said he provided food, etc. but she was quarrelsome and continued scolding (like the Navaho women today!). She told her husband she could take care of herself and so continued scolding, etc. until time for the Corn dance. She carried off the corn to grind and make mush for the dance although her own children were crying with hunger. Finally she told her husband to go off and she could easily find another. She said she could do without assistance. The husband avoided replying to her and said nothing. He lay still all night feeling bad about her. In the morning he did not know what to do. He took his bow and arrow and walked off. Shortly he found some meat in the woods on a tree and he took some and ate it raw. That is why Wolf eats raw meat. He stole this meat (for it belonged to the second chief) but it was by reason of the trouble with his wife and he was muddled. At sunset he returned, said not a word to his wife, nor to his people who came to see him. In the night all his people came to see him for they thought he was sick. On the second night he said nothing, and next morning he would say nothing. The third chief came to see him, “Come out and do some work,” said he. No answer. On the third night it was the same. On the fourth day the fourth chief called on him, still no result. On the fifth night, the three chiefs met together and said, “Let us go to First Chief’s house and speak to him.” So they went and said to him, “We called the people to work but they idle and gamble in the fields. Come into the house (lodge) and examine each separately, and find out who has spoken a bad word of you, our Chief,” but they could find no one who had done so. Then they called in all the women to the lodge to find if any of them had given offense to the chief, still they
found no one; by this time it was nearly daylight. Still the chief would say nothing. The women said there was none of them guilty. This was at daylight. “Who is the man? No man nor woman caused his trouble but the woman he was living with.” On the sixth night the chief said, “I will speak a few words to you, and tomorrow I will go out to the fields.” He went out and saw the crops neglected and weeds growing. On the following night he called the men into his house and they all assembled. He said “I am sorry. My wife alone is to blame, but every woman you have is liable to do the same as mine has done. Let them go and try to make a living for themselves and see how they like that. There is a wide, deep river, without a ford. Let us (men) find means to cross it, and leave all the women behind. Every man must leave his wife.” Most of them felt sorry, and some said, “What will we do in the case of a nursing boy baby, shall we take him away from his mother? How about Nutlys, berdaches? They also like to gamble with the women. Let us see what the berdaches say?” The berdaches were the last to come in. They scratched the ground with a stick a long time trying to make up their minds. They did not care to go with the women, and what could they do? Finally they said, “We will go with the men.” “Very well,” the men said, “That is good, but you must take your own food with you.” The men asked them also, “Have you your own grinding stones, pots, dippers, mush sticks, brushes, are all these your own?” “Yes, by my own hands.” “All right,” the men said, “We will take one berdache with us to cook for us.”

The chief told the men to get ready to cross the river that day. They got ready to go. They had plenty of corn and all kinds of food, but he said, “We must go without anything, only a few kernels for seed.” The berdache took along everything. Rafts were made and preparations completed. Best hunters crossed first so that if they should find any antelope with milk they might bring it back for the children. The berdache remained behind (at the camp after crossing the river) and ground some corn and made a little mush for the children, and the hunters were to come back in the middle of the day with meat and milk. The hunters brought back deer and antelope but many did not feel like eating as they had just parted from their wives. All the men sat up during the night to talk about their trouble. Finally they said, “Let us go to work,” and they began cutting trees for houses. The women camped on the opposite river bank and held out their privates (djocs) where the men could see them, calling out to them, “How would you like to have some?” etc. trying to tantalize them and entice them back. The hunters went out again and some cleared the ground for planting. At that time they had only stone implements for axes and broad sticks for hoes. The second night they camped out again and some brought in deer and antelope and they were better off than before. The fourth night they were all contented, they had plenty of game and food. The little children began to be contented as they grew accustomed to their separation from their mothers. The women camped on the opposite river bank, and ground corn constantly in sight of the men on the opposite bank. The houses were strung along as the mealing stones were arranged. They had some square houses too, but these belonged to the Pueblo Indians. The men became quite indifferent to the women, but the women were becoming restless with increasing amatory desires. Four years this separation continued, and as the men had left plenty of corn and food of all kinds with the women they did not suffer much until the end of this time. By that time however, the fields had become overgrown with sagebrush and cottonwood as the women had planted nothing. Then they had to gather up bones and boil them for all their possessions were exhausted and they suffered greatly. Badger (of the north) wanted to copulate with the women but he had a bad penis, crooked like a hook. The first one he tried was Joshdelhashi, then all the others. It made them crazy and they went wild with desire to copulate continually. Some of them took a corn cob wrapped with any soft substance and continually performed the sexual act artificially. Some tried to swim the river to get to the men but were drowned. Some died crazy with wild desire. This and lack of food caused the death of most of the women. Coyote, Blue Fox, Yellow Fox and Badger copulated with the women continually, and licked the women between the legs. That is why dogs and these animals lick each other that way.
On the other side of the river, the children had grown up so that all could work. They had plenty of food as there were no idlers to consume it. When they killed an antelope they cut out the liver and made a hole in it and artificially performed the sexual act. Some who could overtake a doe would copulate with it, but these lightning struck and burst open. Some in like manner with an antelope doe, and the rattlesnake bit and killed them. Another man would do likewise with mountain sheep and a bear killed him.

Kideztizi was out hunting till late and as he could not reach home he camped. He lay down before the fire with a piece of liver in his hand, warming his penis to cause an erection. Nastjæ (owl) lit on branch above him and hooting called “Kitdeztizi, don’t fornicate that liver,” and then flew away. Another owl came from the same direction and lit crying “You go on and do so if you wish.” He acted on the last suggestion and then went to sleep.

Very few women were left alive, but the men remained strong and well. The men came together one night and began to talk about the women and asked the chief what he thought ought to be done. Most of the men said, “We are here without women and when we begin to die we shall disappear very fast as we have no increase.” They talked four nights and then the chief said, “One of you might go across the river and see how many of the women are left. Look for the woman who caused trouble and if she is dead, all will be well.” She was found alive but could hardly lift her head. Scarcely any flesh remained on her bones and she defecated where she lay. All the four chiefs went over to see her. As the head chief went into his old house where she had abused him, she seized him, but he jerked away from her, and then she began to talk to him. She wept with sorrow and repentance, and acknowledged that she was unable to live alone as she had once thought. All the women came and begged piteously. But the men would not touch them for they all p. 100 smelled bad, like coyotes. The chiefs all returned across the river to discuss the matter. Most of them thought that they might as well keep the few women remaining, or else the race would disappear. The men had one berdache among them and they decided to leave the question to his decision. He said he was content to have the women come across because he was tired of cooking for them all. He said, “The best you can do is to bring these women over.” He made a lot of small boats (rafts) and brought the women across in two days. After the women were brought over the men would give them nothing to eat for they smelled bad, and they put them in the sweathouses and gave them herbs to make them vomit. Some of the women ate too much and it killed them. On the fourth night the sweating ceremonies were over, and the women were fed. They grew fat and healthy again. Those whose wives had died became jealous of those whose wives rejoined them. This jealousy spread, and it has always continued. At the end of four years the young girls had grown fit for wives and those who had none took these. At the end of these four years they came from the east and crossed the

…… Mountains (omitted from mss.)

A long time before this when Teholtsoy left, he built a house under the water upon the bottom of the river, and no one had seen him since. At night the cries of a baby were heard from the water house and Coyote tried to get the baby but failed. He went to Old Man and told him, and Old Man said, “Go to the Spider Woman.” Spider Woman spun a web which spread over the river to the place where the house was beneath the water, and she got the baby and hid it away so that Teholtsoy could not find the child. He is sad to this day because of the loss of the child. He is everybody’s friend. Spider Woman took the baby and wrapped it in the web and placed it under her left arm and no one can find it to this day.

Teholtsoy being unable to find the baby grew crazy and said he would keep on killing everyone he met until he found this child. Being very angry he opened the earth at four corners and let the waters loose, and the rise of the water brought the people together and they saw the waters come up and out of the earth like the clouds and they could not understand it. Then they prayed for the winds, and they came
up. White Wind being quick went to the east, Blue to the south, Yellow to west, and Black to the north, and they returned and said, “You are going to be drowned, for great bodies of water are coming together.” Then one went to East Mountain to get some earth, one to San Francisco Mt., west; one to Navajo Mt., north; and one to San Mateo Mt., east. They brought earth from all these. When Old Man left the lower world Old Woman brought the springs up with her under her arms.

The two youths came back from the mountain called Tcolii. Everybody saw them. One had a piece of hollow reed with four holes in its side, the other a sunflower stem with four holes in its stem (i.e. flutes). And all the people came together. They had plenty of everything, but the water came so quickly upon them they had only time to take enough for seed and they began to climb the mountains but the waters still rose. So the people climbed up to the tops of the pine trees. The two youths who had the reed and sunflower planted the reed and the people got into it and the reed began to grow. Klishjo was at the bottom, then Thunder, then the Turkey whose tail dragged in the water, that is why his feathers are white. These flutes had four holes. The first hole was for Black Wind, second for Yellow, third for Blue, and fourth White, and these winds guarded the holes in the flute. The winds began to blow and the Great Fly also began to shake the flute, and it began to grow, and the rain kept falling. They had no rest for four nights and Badger began to dig upward but came back again. Wunustcinde then began to dig and shortly he penetrated through to another world, but he found nothing but water. Wunustcinde being small he was hard to see, but soon a man in the east who had an axe spied him and came and struck twelve times at him but could not hit him. Then came a man from the south and tried, then from the west, then from the north, but all failed to hurt him. So these four men went back in the directions they came from. The man who came with the axe first went back, but another man came from the east, Tcithkahilkka with two arrows, one trimmed with gray eagle feathers and one with black. He came to Wunustcinde and threw the arrows at him. “What are you doing here?” he said. “You have no right here, this is my land.” Wunustcinde said, “We shall see about that. We would like to live here at any rate.” The man took his arrows and put one up his anus, the other down his throat and pushed them through, then drew them out and threw them to Wunustcinde saying, that if he could do that the land would be his. Wunustcinde said he could do better than that, so he pushed them through his breast, one from each side and taking them by the points drew them through. There was a little blood adhering to them but the act did not hurt him at all. Wunustcinde said, “If you do as I have done, you can have your ground back. It belongs to me now as I have won it from you.” The man picked up his arrows and went home in sorrow. (Repeat for the men who came from the other three points). So Wunustcinde won that country.

He returned to his people and told of his new world, and four of his people went up. One of these with his flint knife cut the ground towards the east and made a little cañon. The next man went south, and dragged his black cane through the soft ground and made an arroyo. Mountain sheep, the third man, went west and formed an arroyo, ploughing up the ground. The fourth was Rhanskidde. He had a straight stick which he dragged along the ground and made an arroyo to the north side. All these four met again in the middle and then went down to their people. The four winds then came up on top and blew as hard as they could and by the fourth night everything was dry and the land beautiful. That is why water runs in all directions. When Badger came up, the ground was muddy in places and he being short-legged got stuck in the mud. That is why he has a black muzzle and black legs. The winds followed after Badger. The leader of the Winds was left-handed. The next one was the Striped Wind. Next the Spotted Wind, and fourth was Shiny Wind. These all raised a tempest which dried up the ground very quickly. They sent out big grey Fly who flew up and found everything beautiful. He returned and reported to his people, and they stayed yet another twelve days before the new world was dry enough for occupancy.
Spider Woman still carried Teholtsody’s child under her arm wrapped in spider web. Everything being in readiness, long ladders were made to reach through the hole from the lower to the new upper world and the people all came up through by this means. The water of the lower world kept rising until it touched the bottom of new world and Turkey was last to come up. The foam touched his tail; that is why it is white on the end. Some water squirted up through the hole after all had got out, and it formed a lake. When all the people were up Hoskjelti (Hosdjeyelti) sought for the best place to build houses and he laid the foundations of the houses of all the Pueblo Indians. While he was working for these people his own people could not wait any longer without houses so they cut down poles and built hogans. Then they arranged their farms, planting all kinds of seed. Teholtsody was still searching for his child and followed these people. He wanted to come out upon this upper world and everyone was afraid and did not know what to do. While people were talking, Spider Woman came in with the child and they made her give the child back to Teholtsody, who then went down to the lower world and closed over the water.

To this latter world was brought from the former ones all the seeds of plants and of trees and of all things that grow.

Navajos and Mokis came up at the same time, (all this legend concerns them both). Public domain content

Religion and Spiritual Beliefs

The White Buffalo Woman (Brule Sioux)

One summer so long ago that nobody remembers how long, the Oceti-Shakowin, the seven sacred councils fires of the Lakota Oyate, the nation, came together and camped. The sun shone all the time, but there was no game and the people were starving. Every day they sent scouts to look for game, but the scouts found nothing.

Among the bands assembled were the Itazipcho, the Without-Bows, who had their own camp circle under their chief, Standing Hollow Horn. Early one morning the chief sent two of his young men to hunt for game. They went on foot, because at that time the Sioux didn’t yet have horses. They searched everywhere but could find nothing. Seeing a high hill, they decided to climb it in order to look over the whole country. Halfway up, they saw something coming toward them from far off, but the figure was floating instead of walking. From this they knew that the person was wakan, holy.

At first they could make out only a small moving speck and had to squint to see that it was a human form. But as it came nearer, they realized it was a beautiful young woman, more beautiful than any they had ever seen, with two round, red dots of face paint on her cheeks. She wore a wonderful white buckskin outfit, tanned until it shone a long way in the sun. It was embroidered with sacred and marvelous designs of porcupine quill, in radiant colors no ordinary woman could have made. This wakan stranger was Ptesan-Wi, White Buffalo Woman. In her hands she carried a large bundle and a fan of sage leaves. She wore her blue-black hair loose except for a strand at the left side, which was tied up with buffalo fur. Her eyes shone dark and sparkling with great power in them.

The young men looked at her open-mouthed. One was overawed, but the other desired her body and stretched his hand out to touch her. This woman was lila wakan, very sacred, and could not be treated with disrespect. Lightning instantly struck the brash young man and burned him up, so that only a small heap of blackened bones was left. Or some say that he was suddenly covered by a cloud, and within it he was eaten up by snakes that left only his skeleton, just as a man can be eaten up by lust.

To the other scout who behaved rightly, the White Buffalo Woman said: “Good things I am bringing, something holy to your nation. A message I carry for your people from the buffalo nation. Go back to the camp and tell your people to prepare for my arrival. Tell your chief to put up a medicine lodge with twenty-four poles. Let it be made holy for my coming.”

This young hunter returned to the camp. He told the chief, he told the people, what the sacred woman had commanded. The chief told the eyapaha, the crier, and the crier went through the camp circle calling: “Someone sacred is coming. A holy woman approaches. Make all things ready for her.” So the people put up the big medicine tipi and waited. After four days they saw the White Buffalo Woman approaching, carrying her bundle before her. Her wonderful white buckskin dress shone from afar. The chief, Standing Hollow Horn, invited her to enter the medicine lodge. She went in and circled the interior sunwise. The chief addressed her respectfully, saying: “Sister, we are glad you have come to instruct us.”
She told them what she wanted done. In the center of tipi they were to put up an owanka wakan, a sacred alter, made of red earth, with a buffalo skull and a three-stick rack for a holy thing she was bringing. They did what she directed, and she traced with her finger on the smoothed earth of the altar. She showed them how to do all this, then circled the lodge again sunwise. Halting before the chief, she now opened the bundle. The holy thing it contained was the chanunpa, the sacred pipe. She held it out to the people and let them look at it. She was grasping the stem with her right hand and the bowl with her left, and thus the pipe has been held ever since.

Again the chief spoke, saying: “Sister, we are glad. We have had no meat for some time. All we can give you is water.” They dipped some wacanga, sweet grass, into a skin bag of water and gave it to her, and to this day the people dip sweet grass or an eagle feather in water and sprinkle it on a person to be purified.

The White Buffalo Woman showed the people how to use the pipe. She filled it with chan-shasha, red willow bark tobacco. She walked around the lodge four times after the manner of Anpetu-Wi, the great sun. This represented the circle without end, the flame to be passed on from generation to generation. She told them that the smoke rising from the bowl was Tunkashila’s breath, the living breath of the great Grandfather Mystery.

The White Buffalo Woman showed the people the right way to pray, the right words and right gestures. She taught them how to sing the pipe-filling song and how to lift the pipe up to the sky, toward Grandfather, and down toward Grandmother Earth, to Unci, and then to the four directions of the universe.

“She will walk like a living prayer. With your feet resting upon the earth and pipestem reaching into the sky, your body forms a living bridge between the Sacred Beneath and the Sacred Above. Wakan Takan smiles upon us, because now we are as one: earth, sky, all living things, the two-legged, the four-legged, the winged ones, the trees and grasses. Together with the people, they are all related, one family. The pipe holds them all together.

“Look at this bowl,” said the White Buffalo Woman. “Its stone represents the buffalo, but also the flesh and blood of the red man. The buffalo represents the universe and the four directions, because he stands on four legs, for the four ages of creation. The buffalo was put in the west by Wakan Tanka at the making of the world, to hold back the waters. Every year he loses one hair, and in every one of the four ages he loses a leg. The sacred hoop will end when all the hair and legs of the great buffalo are gone, and the water comes back to cover the earth.

The wooden stem of this chanunpa stands for all that grows on the earth. Twelve feathers hanging from where the stem—the backbone—joins the bowl—the skull—are from Wanblee Galeshka, the spotted eagle, the very sacred bird who is the Great Spirit’s messenger and the wisest of all flying ones. You are joined to all things of the universe, for they all cry out to Tunkashila. Look at the bowl: engraved in it are seven circles of various sizes. They stand for the seven sacred ceremonies you will practice with this pipe, and for the Ocheit Shakowin, the seven sacred campfires of our Lakota nation.”

The White Buffalo Woman then spoke to the women, telling them that it was the work of their hands and the fruit of their bodies which kept the people alive. “You are from mother earth,” she told them. “What you are doing is as great as what the warriors do.”

And therefore the sacred pipe is also something that binds men and women together in a circle of love.
It is the one holy object in the making of which both men and women have a hand. The men carved the bowl and make the stem; the women decorate it with bands of colored porcupine quills. When a man takes a wife, they both hold the pipe at the same time and red trade cloth is wound around their hands, thus tying them together for life.

The White Buffalo Woman had many things for her Lakota sister in her sacred womb bag—corn, wasna (pemmican), wild turnip. She taught them how to make the hearth fire. She filled a buffalo paunch with cold water and dropped a red-hot stone into it. “This way you shall cook the corn and meat,” she told them.

The White Buffalo Woman also talked to the children, because they have an understanding beyond their years. She told them that what their fathers and mothers did was for them, that their parents could remember being little once, and that they, the children, would grow up to have little ones of their own. She told them: “You are the coming generation, that’s why you are the most important and precious ones. Some day you will hold this pipe and smoke it. Some day you will pray with it.”

She spoke once more to all the people: “The pipe is alive; it is a red being showing you a red life and a red road. And this is the first ceremony for which you will use the pipe. You will use it to keep the soul of a dead person, because through it you can talk to Wakan Tanka, the Great Mystery Spirit. The day a human dies is always a sacred day. The day when the soul is released to the Great Spirit is another.

Four women will become sacred on such a day. They will be the ones to cut the sacred tree—the can-wakan—for the sun dance.

She told the Lakota that they were the purest among the tribes, and for that reason Tunkashila had bestowed upon them the holy chanunpa. They had been chosen to take care of it for all the Indian people on this turtle island.

She spoke one last time to Standing Hollow Horn, the chief, saying, “Remember: this pipe is very sacred. Respect it and it will take you to the end of the road. The four ages of creation are in me; I am the four ages. I will come to see you in every generation cycle. I shall come back to you.”

The sacred woman then took leave of the people, saying: “Toksha ake wacinyanktin ktelo—I shall see you again.”

The people saw her walking off in the same direction from which she had come, outlined against the red ball of the setting sun. As she went, she stopped and rolled over four times. The first time she turned into a black buffalo; the second time into a brown one; the third time into a red one; and finally, the fourth time she rolled over, she turned into a white female buffalo calf. A white buffalo is the most sacred living thing you could ever encounter.

The White Buffalo Woman disappeared over the horizon. Sometime she might come back. As soon as she had vanished, buffalo in great herds appeared, allowing themselves to be killed so that the people might survive. And from that day on, our relations, the buffalo, furnished the people with everything they needed—meat for food, skins for their clothes and tipis, bones for their many tools.

Told by Lame Deer at Winner, Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota, 1967 (Erdoes and Ortiz)

This story is a genesis or origin story. Such a story tells people of the societies from which they come where they come from, their origins. They tell people of the society to whom they belong, how they are
expected to interact with each other, with other elements of creation or nature, and with spiritual beings. Origin stories are an important part of the religious or spiritual beliefs of any society. This story is quite different than the Judeo-Christian story of the Garden of Eden that you may be familiar with.

The origin stories of Native peoples throughout North America are also quite different from each other. Each Native American society has its own origin story; there is no one story as there is in Christianity and Judaism.

Origin stories are just one aspect of religious or spiritual beliefs for any society. Spiritual beliefs tell us where we come from, where we are going after death, and what is expected from us while we are in this world. Spiritual beliefs function on an individual and community level. They tell individuals what they must do to be considered a good person by their family, society, and by the spiritual beings. Spiritual beliefs also tell societies what is expected from them as a community: how individuals within the community should be treated, what qualities are needed for leadership, and how outsiders should be treated. Spiritual beliefs also tell kin groups and communities the consequences of inappropriate behavior. In this way, spiritual beliefs function as a form of social control. They tell individuals within a community what behavior is desired and appropriate, and the consequences of inappropriate behavior.

In Native American origin stories, animals, plants, and even forces of nature like the snakes that ate the disrespectful young man, are active participants in the story. Unlike the Judeo-Christian story in which the serpent is the only animal to have a part mentioned, in Native American stories the animals are very important to the action of the story; often they help humans to survive. Animals may sometimes be tricksters, like Coyote of southwestern stories or the Great Hare of the Southeast, but even they sometimes help humans. You may notice from many of the stories included in this book, humans and animals cooperate and work together. Many Native American societies believe that all things in the world have souls or spirits: therefore all things in the world must be treated respectfully. Anthropologists and others who study religious beliefs call this animism, the belief that key parts of nature have spirits. In foraging societies there are thanksgiving rituals for the animals that give their lives for us to eat. Failing to enact the rituals may result in the animals withdrawing themselves. For all living things there are expectations of behavior, and when humans or animals do not meet these expectations, there are consequences. For example, in the Apache story told at the beginning of Chapter 1, the gray crow eats carrion and is turned black for this inappropriate behavior.

The stories from Native American societies included in this book are parts of much longer cycles of stories that tell what all religious texts tell its followers: where people came from; what will happen to you in the afterlife; and what is expected from you while you are in this world. In telling people what is expected from them while they are in this world, religious or spiritual beliefs function as part of the larger social order. People behave properly because their families and their spiritual beliefs tell them what is appropriate behavior and what will happen to them if they don’t behave appropriately. In any society the stories that relate religious beliefs also tell what is considered appropriate behavior in a society. Origin stories are told and retold within family and community groups. In Native American societies, if a child misbehaves, they are told a story about the consequences of similar behavior for a human or animal.

Ceremonies and rituals are another important part of any religious tradition. Ceremonies are formal religious or public occasions that are performed according to a traditional or prescribed form. There are secular ceremonies like the inauguration of a new president or prime minister, as well as sacred ceremonies that mark religious occasions such as Easter and Passover. Among many Native American societies there are rituals or ceremonies that re-enact aspects of origin stories. Among the Hidatsa this
In some foraging societies, the Naxpike or **hide beating**, and has many of the elements common to the Sun Dance practiced by societies throughout the plains. The ceremonial grounds where the ritual will take place are prepared and blessed by the elder women, then a post made from a cottonwood tree is placed in the middle of the grounds by the elder men. Young men volunteer to re-enact the suffering and torture of **Spring Boy**, the first to person to do the Naxpike. By doing so they achieve individual visions and help renew the earth for their community (Bonvillain 2001). As with origin stories, rituals and ceremonies vary from society to society.

In many predominately Christian countries, new governmental leaders often take an oath of office with their hand on the Bible. Among many Native American societies, such as the Haundenosaune or the southwestern societies, the raising up of a new leader also has heavy religious overtones; the chiefs are fulfilling religious obligations laid out in their origin stories.

A ritual is much like a ceremony, except there is an emphasis on the actions that are done according to a prescribed order. Think about the order of rituals you might be familiar with, like a wedding or services at your church, temple, or mosque. Everyone knows what is coming next in the ritual and there is significance to the order. Among foraging societies, there are rituals to thank the animals, birds, and fish that gave up their lives to be killed for food, and rituals to ensure there will continue to be animals, fish, and birds for the coming years. These rituals are called **renewal ceremonies**. Foraging societies may also have rituals for the growth of plants, particularly plants that are important for medicines. If the rituals are not done, or done incorrectly, the animals or plants may withdraw themselves and no longer be available.

Rituals and ceremonies can meet the needs of individuals and the community. For instance, horticultural or agricultural societies have ceremonies or rituals to ensure the growth of their crops. Among the Haundenosaune, there are ceremonies for the coming of maple sap and strawberries. There are several for corn: the planting of the seeds, the “greening of the corn,” when the plant “tassels,” and the harvesting of the crop. Many societies also have rituals that renew the earth itself, such as the Hidatsa’s Naxpike or the Sun Dance practiced by many Plains societies. The Naxpike or Sun Dance may be done to fulfill an individual’s vow or to invoke a vision. These rituals also fulfill community needs, bringing the community together and renewing the earth for the upcoming year.

Some rituals are done as called for, a thanksgiving ritual when an animal is killed, for example. Additionally, foraging, horticultural, and agricultural Native American societies typically have a cycle of ceremonies that are done on a yearly or **calendric** basis. The cycle of ceremonies includes those having to do with important foods and crops, such as the **Mid-Winter Ceremony**, typically held in January.

Many Native American societies have yearly rituals to renew the earth. The Plains’ Sun Dance is an example of such a ritual. Foraging societies have yearly rituals done to ensure the renewal of needed animals. Horticultural and agricultural societies have ceremonies, of which feasts were an important part, to celebrate and thank the earth for a successful growing season and to ask for a successful succeeding year. These feast-ceremonies often included speeches by leaders about community responsibilities, speeches by ordinary people about the responsibility of the leaders, and games. An important game among many Native societies was a ball game, from which the modern game of lacrosse is probably derived.

In addition to offering thanks, these ceremonies were and are also an opportunity for the community to come together, iron out grievances, have a good time, and look for potential marriage partners. Modern-day **pow-wows** function in a similar way for contemporary Native American communities.
While the traditional ceremonies are still practiced by many societies, pow-wows are an opportunity for those who no longer live on the reservation or reserve to come home to celebrate their culture and family connections. Pow-wows are used to honor respected members of the community, and currently are often held to welcome returning war veterans and incorporate them back into the community. These gatherings are an example of how rituals function on a societal level, bringing the community together for mutual purposes and benefits.

Among Native American societies, rituals and ceremonies may be carried out by ordinary people, or they may be officiated by religious specialists. For example: everyone is expected to do a thanksgiving ritual when hunting or fishing. Any man may pledge himself to do the Sun Dance; but respected women bless and prepare the dance grounds. Respected older men who have already participated in the Sun Dance chop down the cottonwood tree that will be used for the dance pole, and they erect of the pole. Among the Dine’ important rituals are performed by a singer, a man (women have recently started assuming this role as well) who has spent his life learning a cycle of over 250 chants or songs that are used in curing and other ceremonies, along with the technique and designs of sand paintings that are a part of the rituals. Many of the songs or chants are curing ceremonies, used to help cure an individual or even the community. People in Native American societies generally know what available plants are useful in treating illnesses or diseases. As Jack Weatherford has pointed out in Indian Givers and Native Gifts, a number of these plants are now essential to many modern-day medicines. In addition to these medicinal plants, religious practitioners could call upon spiritual powers for help in curing someone.

Many medicinal plants themselves were thought to have spiritual powers.

Among the most specialized of spiritual roles is that of a shaman. The word “shaman” is Siberian in origin and refers to a man or woman who is able to travel to the spirit world through a trance state. In Native American societies, all people have some access to spiritual power and knowledge. Shamans typically work for the entire community to find out why the crops have failed or why hunting has been unsuccessful. In many Arctic societies, it is believed that the animals they depend on were made from the fingers of a woman named Sedna, the guardian of the animals. Sedna will withdraw or remove the animals if hunters have not treated them respectfully and done the thanksgiving rituals after killing them. If hunting becomes unsuccessful, the community’s shaman will enter a trance state and travel underwater to where Sedna lives to find out why the animals have been withdrawn and what must be done to bring them back. To appease Sedna, the shaman will comb her hair, which she can no longer do because of the loss of her fingers.

Shamans and trances are part of the spiritual traditions of many societies around the world. In some societies, anyone may attain a trance through dancing, drumming, chanting, or the use of hallucinate drugs, but they are not recognized as shamans because their trances are typically for individual purposes, while a shaman typically goes into a trance state to benefit his/her community. Shamans are usually called to what can be very difficult roles in their society. An individual may be called through dreams. In many Native American societies, people who have nearly died, particularly through an illness, are thought to have the power to become a shaman because they have already traveled to the spirit world and returned. Among the societies of the Northwest coast, individuals might spend their lifetimes training to become a shaman, often apprenticing themselves to a shaman and inheriting their teacher’s powers upon their death.

As with the specialized, religious practitioners of any society, shamans undergo much training and must live according to many taboos (also spelled tabu). Taboos are things shamans are not suppose to do, though other members of their society may do them. For example, Catholic nuns and priests take vows.
of celibacy, something the rest of us are not expected to do. Some taboos apply to everybody, such as the taboos prohibiting incest or cannibalism. Taboos may also be temporary. For example, Catholics used to not eat meat on Fridays. In some foraging societies, pregnant women will not eat rabbit meat because they believe it will cause their children to be timid and fearful. In the United States and Canada, athletes may abstain from certain foods or behaviors, believing they will be weakened. For shamans, taboos are usually life long.

In addition to abiding by the taboos, shamans typically live very solitary lives. They must spend much time learning their skills. In turn, their skills make them very powerful, and potentially vary dangerous. Those who have the power to heal, also have the power to injure or kill. As a result, shamans are often feared and somewhat distrusted by their societies. Among the Northwest coast societies, who typically live in large, extended families, shamans live alone in the woods. When they die, their homes are abandoned and allowed to decay. Because of their power, special funeral rites and burial methods are often accorded to shamans. Despite the power a shaman may have, it is not a life to which many people aspire.

While shamans have special spiritual powers, Native American societies believe all people—indeed, all living things—have access to spiritual power. One of the ways spiritual power is attained is through dreams. Revitalization movements were often started in response to dreams. Dreams are seen as a conduit between people and the spirit realm. Through dreams the spirits tell people how to live their lives, what they're doing wrong, even warning them of danger. Many Native American societies have rituals in which people seek advice about their dreams. A person with a troubling dream may go to a shaman; or, as among the Haundenosaune, they may tell it to the entire community for advice about its meaning. The Iroquois, and many other Native American societies, believe the messages of dreams must be acted upon or there will be negative consequences for the individual and the entire community.

Another way individuals have access to spiritual power is through visions. Men and women will undertake a vision quest as a way to attain spiritual power. In a vision quest individuals will go to a solitary place and go without food, water, and sleep in order to obtain a vision. It is believed the spirits will tell individuals what is expected from them through visions.

The vision quest can be part of life cycle rituals—rituals that mark important transitions in a person’s life. Not all Native American societies have the same life cycle rituals, but there are typically rituals to mark birth, the attainment of personhood, adulthood, marriage, and death. A mother (and sometimes the father) may begin rituals before a child is born. A mother may abstain from some foods, such as rabbit, to ensure the child will be brave and not run away from danger. Rituals are done to ensure an easy delivery and a healthy child. Among the Dine’, a blessingway song is sung over the mother to ensure an easy birth and protect the child and mother from evil spirits. The mother may also be given medicinals, and the women in her family may manipulate her abdomen to aid in the birth. After birth and bathing, the baby is sprinkled with white and yellow corn pollen, and the women of the mother’s family will gently press the baby’s body to ensure good health.

It is a sad fact that not all children who are born survive. Factors like malnutrition, diseases, and poor water supplies can all affect the survival rates of infants. In non-industrial societies, infants who die are generally not given their society’s typical burial rituals. Many societies believed the infant’s soul enters the body of another newborn, went into an animal or bird, or returned to the spirit world until it could be born again. So while ceremonies may be done at birth, a child is often not considered a person or given a name until she or he has lived for a time. Such rituals are personhood rituals, as they
incorporate the child into his or her society. Among the Tewa Pueblo, for example, children are incorporated into their moiety and given a moiety-specific name during the water-giving ritual when they are eight days old. The Zunis believe a newborn child is soft or not yet ripened, so it is kept in the house away from the sun for eight days after birth. Before dawn on the eighth day the child’s umbilical cord is buried, connecting the child to Mother Earth and the underworld from which its ancestors emerged. The baby is washed, put in its cradleboard, and cornmeal is put in its hands. Its paternal grandmother will carry the baby outside, facing the rising sun. The baby usually does not receive a name then. Its family will wait until the baby has hardened and are confident the child will survive (Bonvillain 2001).

Among the most important rituals for any individual are coming of age rituals. Adolescence (teen years), when one is not a child but not yet an adult, is the invention of industrial societies in which young people are not supposed to engage in adult behaviors and are not supposed to be engaged in wage-labor, but instead go to school. In non-industrial societies, individuals are considered either children or adults. Even children may engage in labor that provides resources for their families and communities. Coming of age rituals mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. The vision quest is an example of a coming of age ritual for young men. Often, for the first time, they must go into the woods, mountains, or desert by themselves, fast, and try to stay awake until they receive a vision. Killing an animal for food or fighting an enemy may also be part of a young man’s coming of age ritual. The young man’s family will hold a feast and often give-aways, in which goods and resources are given away, to mark his transition to adulthood.

Young women also go through coming of age rituals, usually when they start menstruating. Among the most elaborate is the kinaalda, girl’s puberty rite, of the Dine’. The kinaalda is a four-day ceremony. At dawn and noon on each day, the young woman, accompanied by friends and family members, races to the east to build up her strength and endurance. A respected older woman will knead her body (as newborn babies are kneaded) to mold her to also become a respected woman. The young woman and her family prepare large amounts of food, particularly corn, to be part of a community feast held on the fourth day. On this day the young woman washes, and then her face is painted with white lines. She then distributes food to all the guests (Schwarz 1997).

Coming of age rituals have several purposes. They show that young men and women have acquired the skills and knowledge needed for adulthood. They mark the transition from childhood to adulthood in front of the entire community. Historically, after a coming of age ritual, newly anointed men and women are able to marry. Thus, like many religious beliefs and rituals, it functions on the individual and societal level.

In historical Native American societies, marriage ceremonies were not as elaborate as those of contemporary U.S. and Canadian societies. The ceremony would often consist of the exchange of gifts between the bride and groom and their families and a feast. Of more importance were death or funeral rituals. Like birth and adulthood, death is a transition, so anthropologists often call rituals that mark them rites of passage. For many Native American societies, birth is the transition from the spirit world; death is a transition back to the spirit world. Death rituals may be started before the individual dies to help in this transition. Among the Dine’, for example, a night way ceremony may be held to help prepare the individual and his/her family for the death. The Dine’ have a great fear of ghosts; so much of the behavior at the funeral ritual is to ensure the ghost of the dead does not stay around kin members. The body is carefully washed and dressed by kin members, but the left moccasin is put on the right foot and the right moccasin is put on the left foot, to make it difficult for the ghost to walk. If the
person dies at home, the body is carried out through a hole cut into the wall so as to not contaminate the usual paths of the living. If the deceased dies in a hogan, the traditional house-structure of the Dine’, the hogan is abandoned or burnt down. The body is transported in silence to a remote spot.

Burial typically takes place in the ground, or a rock niche that is then sealed. The mourners return by a different path, go through a purification ceremony, and never speak the name of the deceased. These observances help to ensure that the ghost of the deceased does not follow or return to haunt family members (Bonvillain 2001). The Dine’ believe the deceased must become part of nature or the cosmos, “as a drop of water is part of a rain cloud.”

Unlike the Dine’, the Lakota have a ritual to keep the spirit of the beloved family member close, at least a period of time. Called the Ghost Bundle ritual, the belongings, cloths, hair, tools, or ornaments of the deceased are kept in a bundle. The keeping of a Ghost Bundle requires a great commitment on the part of the family. A woman of the family is required to always be with the Ghost Bundle. When the Lakota were on the plains and living in teepees, the Ghost Bundle was the first item to be removed, and held by the woman in charge of it when the community moved. She then carried it to the new living site. The first thing to go into the teepee when it was re-erected was the Ghost Bundle. After the end of a year the bundle is opened, the spirit or ghost released to the spirit world, and the items distributed to family members (Deloria 1988). A give-away usually occurs during the opening of the bundle, so the family must also have economic resources to conduct this ritual. The time and resources required for keeping a Ghost Bundle all serve to prohibit families from holding such a ceremony for all deceased family members, only their most honored members, such as grandparents.

Missionaries and government agents all strove to convert Native American societies to Christianity, or to at least to stop them from practicing their own religious traditions. In the United States, from the 1880s until John Collier’s administration of the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the 1930s, Native American religious practices were openly prohibited. It was not until 1978 that The American Indian Religious Freedom Act, which guaranteed the rights of American Indians to practice their religions, was passed by the U.S. government. The act was amended in 1993 and 1994, largely to protect the right of Native Americans, particularly those who are members of the American Indian Church to use peyote as part of their rituals. Peyote is a hallucinogenic cactus found in the Southwest. The Huichol people of northern Mexico have used peyote for thousands of years to attain a trance state to commune with Brother Deer, the creator-spirit of the Huichol. Members of the American Indian Church also use peyote to attain a trance state. In 1999 the Religious Freedom Act was further amended to allow Native American prisoners the right to have their own religious rituals while in jail.

The American Indian Church is a part of the Pan-Indian Movement in the United States. Because of population loss, the loss or removal from traditional lands, and the boarding school experience, many Native peoples have lost parts of their culture, such as language and religious rituals. When Native peoples from across Canada and the United States would meet through boarding schools, the military, and college, they would practice what they remembered of their rituals and combine them with those from other Native peoples they encountered who might have very different practices. For instance, not all Native peoples partook in sweat baths, the practice of enduring a very hot steam bath for an extended period of time for both physical and spiritual cleansing. Sweat baths, like pow-wows, are practices that have been adopted by many Native American groups throughout North America and are part of the American Indian Church. Through a process called syncretism, the amalgamation or combining of religions or cultures, practices of the American Indian Church may also include Christian beliefs. Some people who have taken peyote as part of rituals in the American Indian Church say they see Jesus Christ while in a trance.
Christian missionaries of all denominations liked to think they were successfully converting Native Americans to their churches. But in many instances the traditional religions went “underground,” and were practiced secretly in isolated spots. In other instances, Native American religious traditions were combined with Christian traditions, as in the American Indian Church. The Christian celebration of Christmas is an example of syncretism. We have no idea when Jesus Christ was born; but Christians celebrate it on December 25 because that date coincides with the Roman holiday of Saturnia, a winter solstice ceremony in which gifts are exchanged. Many attributes of Christmas, such as lights, trees, and mistletoe are northern European traditions also associated with the winter solstice. As Christianity spread throughout Europe, its leaders found it was often better to incorporate these pagan (which simply means “of or from the country”) traditions into their own, rather than try to eliminate them. The same process of syncretism happened in Native American societies.

In the Southwest, pueblos where churches were built with Native slave labor are found the Stations of Cross, statues or paintings that depict events from the crucifixion of Christ. In the Pueblo churches, in front of each station is a small pot or bowl that contains the corn pollen that is essential to all Pueblo rituals. In front of grave markers and crosses there are small bowls containing corn pollen. So while the Puebloan peoples may attend the Catholic churches, it contains elements of the pre-Christian Pueblo traditions. In the Northeast, at the St. Regis Catholic Church at the Akwesase, Mohawk church hymns are often sung in Mohawk, and sweet grass is burnt during Mass instead of incense.

These are just a few examples of the syncretism found in many Native American communities. People might attend Christian church on Sunday, but they will also attend the cycle of rituals to thank the earth for its plants and animals, and people will still have potlatches or kinaaldas to mark the coming of age of their sons and daughters. People do not randomly adopt new traditions alongside old beliefs. The people of a society will adopt or accept new traditions and beliefs that best fit with their existing beliefs and traditions. The Pueblo peoples of the Southwest used corn pollen as part of religious rituals for thousands of years before the arrival of Christian missionaries, and they still use corn pollen within the Catholic churches. Just as Christians around the world may celebrate Christmas, they celebrate it differently because the Christmas celebrations are combined with the celebrations of previous societies. In the United States and Canada people from all over the world have settled here and brought their traditions with them, which through syncretism have become part of the Christmas traditions practiced here.

Religion and spiritual beliefs were/are important ways the indigenous peoples of the Americas adapted to and survived the consequences of European contact. After the American Revolution, the Seneca prophet Handsome Lake was gravely injured, and while in a coma he had visions. When he regained consciousness, he told those gathered around him that in his visions he had seen The Peacekeeper and Jesus Christ. Handsome Lake went on to preach a new religious doctrine called the Good News. This doctrine included the centuries-old beliefs of the Seneca and Haundenosauna, along with elements of Christianity, particularly as presented by Quaker missionaries that fit with existing Iroquois beliefs.

Handsome Lake didn’t think he was undoing any aspect of The Great Law, but some aspects of the new beliefs taken from the Christian missionaries showed to be of benefit to his people. The anthropologist Anthony Wallace, in Death and Rebirth of the Seneca, suggests it was the new beliefs and practices of the Good News that helped enable the Seneca to survive their devastating losses after the American Revolution and adapt to the changes occurring around them.

Whether Wallace is correct in his assessment, Handsome Lake’s visions and preaching about the Good News is an example of a revitalization movement. Revitalization movements have occurred in
societies around the world and throughout history. They continue to occur. These movements are ways for people to cope with and adjust to societal and cultural changes. Sometimes revitalization movements work with other societal elements, such as the political system. Such was the case with the Shawnee Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatataw, better known as the Shawnee Prophet.

Unlike many other Native American leaders who would try to hold on to at least some land and sovereignty by accommodating to European, American, and Canadian demands, Tecumseh maintained that all land in North America was Indian land and that no Native American individual or tribe could sell what belonged to all Native Americans. Tecumseh’s ideas of Native American unity was aided by his brother Tenskwatataw, whose visions told him that Native peoples had been corrupted by adopting white ways. Tenskwatataw told the Shawnee to get rid of these corrupting influences, which included drinking, domesticated animals, and the goods from European trade, such as guns, and return to their traditional ways. According to Tenskwatataw, if enough Native peoples would do this, the Europeans, Americans, and their effects on Native societies would be supernaturally swept away.

In 1808, Tecumseh and Tenskwatataw established a village called Prophet’s Town on Tippecanoe Creek in what is now Indiana. Using Prophet’s Town as his base, Tecumseh traveled down the Mississippi, across the southeast to Florida, west to the Osages in what is now Missouri, and east to the Iroquois. In his journeys, Tecumseh did his best to arouse these various Native American societies to join forces against the Europeans and Americans. Some, particularly in the Old Northwest, joined him, while others like the Iroquois, still recovering from the ravages of the American Revolution, welcomed him politely, but did not join him.

On June 18, 1812, the United States declared war against Great Britain. Almost immediately, the United States launched invasion forces against the British in Canada. Once again, Native American communities were torn apart by the enticements of Great Britain and the United States to join them in war against the other. Like most Iroquois, Tecumseh saw alignment with the British as the best opportunity to maintain the sovereignty and land base of Native peoples. Tecumseh and his warriors joined England’s General Isaac Brock and his soldiers and helped capture Fort Detroit and later Fort Dearborn.

Tecumseh’s diplomacy in the Southeast paid off as the Creeks initiated attacks in Georgia and Tennessee. In the fall, Tecumseh visited the Creek territory with a promise of British support. He left a bundle of red sticks, one of which was supposed to be broken every day, with the day of the last stick signaling the day of a concerted attack. Thus, the battles in the Southeast have become known as the Red Stick War. In 1813, some of Tecumseh’s followers were overeager and started attacks before the prescribed day. As a result, the American Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins demanded the guilty parties be punished. Afraid to start a full-blown conflict and fighting among their own people, the chiefs sent out enforcement parties against the hostile forces, killing eight of Tecumseh’s warriors.

Unfortunately for Tecumseh and his followers, the able leader Brock, a man Tecumseh respected, was killed in battle. The incompetent Colonel Henry Procter replaced Brock and allowed the massacre of survivors who had advanced to retake Detroit. When he heard this news, Tecumseh was equally enraged at Procter and his own troops. Procter was again allowing the killing of prisoners taken when William Henry Harrison advanced to build Fort Meigs. When Tecumseh heard this from one of his soldiers, he galloped to the scene, throwing himself upon the killers and stopping another massacre. Tecumseh is said to have told Procter he was unfit to command and “to go on put on petticoats.” Two days later, Procter lifted the siege and returned to Fort Malden, over the protest of Tecumseh.
On September 10th 1813, American Admiral Matthew Perry achieved his famous naval victory on Lake Erie, cutting off the British supply route to the West. Procter retreated from Detroit, abandoning the Native troops. Harrison eventually caught up with Tecumseh’s army at the Battle of the Thames on October 5th. Tecumseh, the man who had tried to unify eastern Native Americans against further British or American invasion, was killed in fierce fighting among his troops; a monument topped by a Canadian flag marks the spot.

The peoples of the Northwest also turned to religion and revitalization movements to adapt to changes brought by Euro-American power. In 1881, a Salish man in Washington state named John Slocum grew very ill. His wife Mary and the rest of his family thought he had died and were preparing him for the funeral when he revived. Slocum said God told him the Native peoples would be saved if they gave up drinking, smoking, and gambling and returned to their traditional ways of sharing resources and cooperation. However, Slocum warned against some of the traditional rituals, including healing rituals practiced by shamans.

Slocum’s family and friends organized a church for him to preach from in Shake Point, Washington. The following year he again became very ill. Contrary to his instructions, his family brought in a shaman to cure him. His wife Mary became so distraught about the presence of the shaman, she left their house, crying and praying. She started to shake and tremble. Returning to their home in this condition, she began to pray over her husband. He soon returned to health. News of her curative powers—supposedly brought on by the shaking—soon spread throughout the Northwest and California, which attracted new members to the church. Many members of Slocum’s Church started to shake at services.

Missionaries and federal and local authorities were critical of what soon became known as the Shaker Church. To protect their form of religious practice, the Shakers formerly constituted themselves as a church in 1892. The Church’s governing body is based on the structure of Protestant churches, with an elected bishop and board of elders.

The Shaker Church is an excellent example of the syncretism of Christian and Native American beliefs. Members of the Shaker Church make the sign of the cross and believe in God, Jesus and the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God is manifested in them when they start to shake. Church members believe the shaking gives them the power to heal, foretell the future, and battle evil, all skills of traditional shamans. The Shakers’ belief in the Spirit of God and “Shaker Spirits,” who guide them to heaven after death, is also consistent with traditional beliefs about the power to contact the spirit world through trances or visions, the ability to prophesize, and the existence of helping spirits. The Shakers’ healing trance is similar to shamanistic healing through a shaman’s trance. The ethical principles of the Shaker Church are similar to those of other Native American revitalization movements that stress sharing, cooperation, and refraining from alcohol and disruptive behavior, usually associated with Euro-American influence. The beliefs of the Shaker Church also fit into the traditional qualities valued by Northwest societies, especially traditional patterns of status and rank. Although members of the Shaker Church are often a minority in Northwest Native communities, they are often the communities’ most influential members.

What is now known as the first Ghost Dance began in 1869 with the spiritual visions of a prophet named Wodziwob, a Northern Paiute from the Walker River Indian Reservation in Nevada. In his vision, Wodziwob was told that the Indian dead would return and with them the old, happy life, provided that Native people tirelessly devoted themselves to round dances. Native adherents assembled for dances that lasted four or five days. Dancers collapsed from exhaustion and received visions in which
they saw their deceased relatives. This Ghost Dance spread throughout native California and up into Oregon in the 1870s. As the 1870 Ghost Dance grew, three separate cults developed among certain tribes in Native California: the Earth Lodge Cult, the Bole-Maru, and the Big Head Cult, an offshoot of the Bole-Maru.

The Earth Lodge Cult came from the practice of the Ghost Dance among the severely depopulated Northern Yana. It spread from them to various groups including the Pomo of the southwest. It was similar to the Ghost Dance proper in its excitement over immediate supernatural phenomenon. But, whereas the Ghost Dance stressed the return of the dead, the Earth Lodge cult stressed the end of the world. The faithful would be protected from this catastrophe by semi-subterranean structures built for this specific purpose. The cult’s basic tenets were that world destruction was imminent and only performing religious rituals in large, specially constructed ceremonial earth lodges, which usually spanned 40 to 60 feet in diameter, could ensure survival. Followers of the cult also prophesied that the Native American dead would rise.

Local prophets appeared in each tribe—each bringing his own special message and form of enlightenment. For example, in 1871 through 1872, a Long Valley Cache Creek Pomo medicine man named Richard Taylor preached that to bring on the end of the world, Pomo people needed to come together in round houses and follow specific standards of behavior associated with those of white society. They must refuse alcohol and limit their contact with Euro-Americans. In addition, they must practice the songs and prayers obtained by Taylor in a vision. This was a powerful and seductive message for people ravaged by years of conquest. A thousand Pomo people constructed 7 roundhouses in which participants could congregate. They danced faithfully for days, but the world did not end. The Native American dead did not return. Some might consider this religious movement to have, therefore, been a failure. Further reflection is warranted, however.

This religious movement arose during a time of tremendous social upheaval. We need to consider what it provided for the people involved. It gave Pomo people a new spiritual life upon which to focus, that helped to meld divergent people—remnant groups from populations devastated by European-introduced diseases and conquest—into a new community. This gave them hope and out of it another new form of spiritual life arose, the Bole-Maru.

The Bole-Maru name comes from the combination of Patwin and Pomo words for the Ghost Dance cult, which developed among the California Hill Patwin. Followers of the Bole-Maru cult emphasized individual salvation through a Supreme Being and a ceremonial dreamer—a person who could see into the future. The Big Head Cult, which used special masks, was a ceremonial variation of the early Bole-Maru. Both the Bole-Maru and the Big Head cults prophesied the resurrection of the American Indian dead, though both downplayed this idea in favor of other religious prophecies. The Big Head cult continued among some native Californians throughout the 1880s.

The Bole-Maru gradually abandoned the doctrines of imminent world catastrophe and instead stressed concepts of afterlife and of the Supreme Being. Because members of the Bole-Maru cult held to this particular belief, many scholars have understood this religious movement to be the transition to adoption of Christianity. More recently, others have taken into consideration the time at which the Bole Maru developed and do not believe it was a transition to Christianity. This was a time when governmental officials had tremendous power over the lives of American Indian people. Native American religions were frowned on as primitive and counterproductive. In fact, Indian religions were formally outlawed with the Religious Crimes Codes of 1883. The Bole-Maru evolved, therefore,
during a time of extreme repression of Native life. As a result, many traditional practices went underground. Pomo people could not afford to show how the blending of different religious and cultural ideals laid the foundation for a fierce form of Indian resistance.

Perhaps the best-known rituals of Native peoples to Euro-Americans are the **Sun Dance** and **Ghost Dance**. Many people of the Plains have a ritual called the Sun Dance. While the way the Sun Dance was and is done varies from one society to another, there are many similarities. Traditionally, the Sun Dance is held during the summer when groups of communities come together to trade, dance, and feast.

Marriage partners were often found during the dancing and feasting. The Sun Dance was an important part of these activities. A temporary encampment of **tipis** was set up in a circle, with a cleared area in the middle. The trunk of a cottonwood tree was set up in the middle of this cleared area. Many rituals accompanied the clearing of the area, the selection, cutting down and setting up of the pole, often directed by women. Men would purify themselves in **sweat baths** and refrain from eating or drinking before starting to dance around the pole. They would not eat or drink during the day as they were dancing, sometimes for up to four days. In some societies, men pierced the muscles on their chests and backs with hooks connected to leather thongs attached to the pole. The men would dance until the hooks broke through the muscles.

For the community, the Sun Dance was performed in thanksgiving for a bountiful year and a request for another year of food, health, and success. Individual men would pledge to do the Sun Dance to honor a lost family member and in thanks that a family member (particularly a child) had recovered from injuries or illness. Today men and women will pledge to do the Sun Dance to maintain their sobriety from alcohol or drugs, as well as to honor lost family members or in thanksgiving that a family member has recovered from illness. I know one young man who was told by an elder he should pledge the Sun Dance in thanksgiving for the birth of his daughter and to understand the pain her mother went through in giving her birth. Many veterans pledge the Sun Dance in thanksgiving for returning home safely and to help recover from the horrors of war.

Missionaries and government officials tried to stop the Sun Dance among the Plains peoples. While its practice was reduced, for many reservations the ritual went underground and was practiced in secret at remote spots. In the United States the **Freedom of Religion Act of 1928** guaranteed the rights of Native Americans to practice their religious ceremonies and rituals, including the Sun Dance, although missionaries and government representatives still tried to stop many practices. During his tenure as director of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, John Collier tried to eliminate restrictions on Native American religious rituals and other cultural traditions. Some of the varieties of the Sun Dance may have been lost, but in general, the memories of communities kept the ritual alive. Following times of war, many veterans returning to both reservation and urban homes sought out elders to show them how the Sun Dance was done. As a result, the Sun Dance has experienced a resurgence. Native men and women from around the country, along with some Euro-Americans, often travel to the plains to participate in the Sun Dance.

Many societies of the plains also adopted an outgrowth of the 1869 Ghost Dance as part of their religious rituals. Among the Plains peoples, the Ghost Dance largely consisted of people dancing in a circle for hours or even days at a time. It was their belief that if they danced long enough, the Creator would wipe the Euro-Americans away by rolling the surface of the earth up like a giant carpet. Under that surface would be a new and pristine earth where lost family members and the important bison would be found again. After the victory at Little Big Horn, the Cheyenne and Lakota tried to evade the U.S. Army that was pursuing them. For a time, Sitting Bull and his people resided in western Canada.
Ultimately, the Cheyenne and Lakota returned to their homelands. Many were rounded up by the Army and placed on reservations. Remember the Ghost Dance is an example of a revitalization movement. In this time of distress, many Plains peoples started doing the Ghost Dance in an attempt to bring back their traditional lifestyles. Government officials were convinced that the Ghost Dance was dangerous and the Lakota were planning another uprising. Indian agents decided to withhold rations until the Ghost Dance stopped. Ethnologist James Moody submitted a report to government officials, assuring them that the Ghost Dance was a peaceful religious ritual to help the Native peoples adjust to the trauma they were experiencing and that rations and blankets should be immediately given to the people, but government officials remained unconvinced. On December 15, 1890, Sitting Bull was shot and killed while being arrested, apparently by a Lakota policeman. The Ghost Dance continued and tensions continued to escalate among the U.S. government officials and the Lakota. At dawn on December 29, the Army attacked the encampment of Big Foot and his followers at Wounded Knee Creek. More than 300 men, women, and children were massacred and buried in a mass grave.

Ironically, Big Foot was traveling to the Pine Ridge Reservation to negotiate a resolution to the tensions.

Reports of the massacre in newspapers and by military officials resulted in an official investigation. The investigation found the government had:

- Failed to provide the seeds and agricultural implements promised for farming, Failed to provide the cows and oxen promised,
- Failed to issue the annuity supplies to which the Lakota were entitled through treaties, Failed to pay for the horses taken from the Indians

(Mooney 1965:79-80)

In the past, as today, the dominant culture can be very uncomfortable with religious practices that are different then their own. In any society, religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are important to most individuals in that society, and to the society itself, as it adjusts and adapts to new cultural circumstances. Sometimes these changes are part of the natural evolution or change in a society: such as in the United States or Canada in which people have to adjust to changes brought about by science and technology or in the cases of indigenous peoples who have to adjust to changes brought on by dominant political entities. Human societies have had to adapt to another since one group of extended kin met another group of extended kin—in other words for thousands of years. As humans, we have adapted in various ways. Religious and spiritual beliefs have been and continue to be one of those ways.

**Suggested Questions**

What does the story about White Buffalo Woman tell you about Sioux society?

Write a description of a ritual you have witnessed or participated in. Would this ritual tell a visitor something about your society?

Can you give an example of a ritual you are familiar with in which playing games is an important part?

Does the society or community in which you live have any rituals, such as the Sun Dance, to help soldiers who have participated in warfare re-integrate himself or herself back into broader society? Do you think this would be a good idea? Why?
What is an example of a taboo in your society?

Does your society have a coming of age ritual? Can you write a description of it?

If you don’t think your society has a coming of age ritual, do you think it should? Can you give some suggestions as to what the ritual would be like?

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Traditional Native Attitudes

Unfortunately, most Americans who read Indian literature aren’t reading literature written by Indians. Instead, they are reading literature written by whites with an Indian setting. Why would such “fake” literature, which is not truly representing Native experiences, preferred over “the real thing”? I want to set these ideas out here for you so that we can avoid some silly-looking statements about “how Natives are” which might be based on the literature that poses as Native American. In this class, we’ll read only authentic Native American literature, and we will come to understand the difference between it and the stuff that mass audiences and publishers prefer. We’ll even look at why they might prefer the inauthentic literature.

So, let me outline some traditional Native American features in the debate over the what is and what was.

Expect Native Authors to Play with the Traditional

We would be doing a disservice to the contemporary Native American authors we will read if we overlooked the flexible ways they make sense of the past. These authors are not relics, antiques. They are, I think, complex individuals whose writings reveal an ability to negotiate between vastly different cultures. They are interested in how cultures interact.

Each one of use negotiates with our past. I’ve noticed that, for some reason, students sometimes don’t want to allow these authors to have a real, complex relationship with their culture and its traditions. It’s much easier to read these authors as mere mouthpieces for past traditions. I hope that doesn’t sound vague to you. It’s just important that you read closely, looking for ways in which these authors characterize their relationship with their traditions.

Credit these authors with complexity. They are not hiding behind an Indian mysticism. Instead, they are creating characters and plots which are modern, complex, and alive with the problems we face today.

Using this Lecture

(The following progression is adapted from pages 24-5 of James Wilson’s informative history, *The Earth Shall Weep: A Native History of North America.*) Note that the scope of our discussion (and the class) are incredibly general, so we can’t take this too far. Still, here are some common threads you may see in traditional Native American poems, songs, and cultural beliefs:

Sacred Power

This is the idea that everything in the universe was interconnected and possessed a spiritual force or energy that could affect the lives of “the people” and of all other living things. Gaining power and the aid of powerful beings was absolutely vital: for success in hunting, plentiful crops, good health, thriving children and victory in battle. But power was also dangerous. By wrongdoing or negligence you could easily offend one of the spirits and see your food supply dwindle, your family stricken or your...
community defeated.

Orality

Experience and understanding are embodied in stories and legends that often offer the profoundest guide to how a people perceive reality. Stories may change greatly over time, but the fact that they are told over and over—and are memorized—gives the oral tradition a conservative cast. Also, think about the strength of a told story. It has a power that poetry has; the performance of a known story is a binding social event. On the other hand, think of how much tradition could be lost if key members of a group died due to disease or war. In this sense, Native American groups have lost much, and there is a need to re-search their culture for what has survived, for what is authentic and lasting.

Ritual & Ceremony

By following the prescribed instructions, “the people” were able to secure the favor and assistance of powerful spiritual forces. . . . Because everything in the universe was interrelated, and because “the people” were at the center of it, their rituals not only regulated their own relationship with the sacred and with other living beings but also ensured that the whole natural order was properly maintained.

What rituals do you go through in your own life? Do you think we have fewer rituals than traditional oral cultures?

Why is it important to do the ritual “just right”?

Do cultures with lots of rituals tend to be liberal or conservative?

The Animal Master

Animal masters are spiritual “masters” (or “keepers” or “owners”) who controlled the game on which hunters depended for food. For example, there might be a buffalo king who tells his people where they are to graze, or when they should migrate.

Animal masters reflect the idea that the animal does not die.

Planting cultures had differing myths of dismemberment and ritual planting/sacrifice.

If game was killed in the wrong way or without the proper ritual, if the meat was treated disrespectfully, wasted or not shared generously among the whole group, then the animal masters would become angry and withhold food in the future.

Tricksters are often a play on the animal master. The trickster figure is found in many cultures, and constitutes a richly creative personality in folklore and myth.

Animal characters are often given human traits like the ability to speak. Animals are often characterized by a predominant personality trait.

Questions and Ideas

- To what extent is the view that Native Americans hold the land sacred a valid statement?
• What do you think about the land/area in which you live?
• In *The Power of Myth*, Joseph Campbell, a noted scholar of mythology, likens the 19th century Indian view of reality to calling everything a *Thou*. He contrasts this with a typical white attitude in which animals and the land were seen as merely *Its*. Consider this contrast as you read our assigned texts.
• Is ownership of land a ridiculous idea? From what point of view might it seem ridiculous? What “value” is there in this point of view? Do you “buy” it?

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• Traditional Native Attitudes. **Authored by:** Joshua Dickinson. **Provided by:** Jefferson Community College. **Located at:** [http://www.sunyjefferson.edu](http://www.sunyjefferson.edu). **Project:** Survey of Native American Literature. **License:** [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0)
Chapter 6: Fiction Readings and Responses

Approaching Fools Crow

*Fools Crow* should be an interesting read for you. Remember to mark up your book on passages you find interesting. Make connections.

There are some key themes that recur, and it’s important to note these. When reading a big book, it’s important to pace yourself. If someone says “I couldn’t put it down,” then it was probably not a book worth remembering. We know that long reading sessions usually result in readers remembering only the beginning and the end of their reading for that time. Break it up! Be specific in your reactions. It’s not going to be enough that you recall events generally. You might not have the memory of people who lived in oral cultures! I list especially good quotes in a notebook. (If you do this, practice putting the page in after the quote.)

The novel is a form that allows you to immerse yourself in the action. Welch does this here, but he also recreates Indian life in the 1800s. The term for recreating life faithfully is “verisimilitude.” In other words, he is capturing what was. But, he’s also working *against* what other writers have said, so in this sense he really is recreating things. I hope that you find the book an easy one to “get into.” Remember the ideas we’ve mentioned about serious literature. How does this piece fit those criteria?

- How might *Fools Crow* extend or challenge these criteria?
- Does it break any easy stereotypes that popular culture holds for Indians? Does it strengthen or entrench any stereotypes?

Finally, the novel is all about choices. You may find the character surprisingly modern in the sense that he knows his choices. I think that one of Welch’s goals was to complicate our ideas about the voice of Plains Peoples. He enriches their voices and thought processes. Welch is pushing and pulling, getting information down “as it might have happened” and expanding our concept of what was. Do you see how these two goals are contradictory? He is aware of the path his people must take. Either decision has negative consequences. Does this make him a tragic hero in the Western literary sense—and not merely in the pop culture sense of “something bad happening”?
Sherman Alexie: What You Pawn I Will Redeem

Sherman Alexie is a noteworthy Native writer who is known for his outspoken viewpoints and one-off quotes. (In 2018, he also became known for his apology to accusers for alleged sexual harassment.) This The New Yorker story “What You Pawn I Will Redeem” is available at:

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/04/21/what-you-pawn-i-will-redeem

What makes this one of the more heavily anthologized of Native American short stories? All rights reserved content

Leslie Marmon Silko: Tony's Story

Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Tony’s Story” recounts an actual confrontation that also gets fictionalized in Simon Ortiz’s “The Killing of a State Cop.” Silko’s story can be found at:

www.people.ku.edu/~write-on/203/pdf/Silko%20Tony%27s%20Story.pdf

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Chapter 7: Poetry

Approaching Poetry

Introduction

This reading is designed to develop the analytical skills you need for a more in-depth study of literary texts. You will learn about rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, poetic inversion, voice and line lengths and endings. You will examine poems that do not rhyme and learn how to compare and contrast poetry.

By the end of this reading you should be able to:

- have an awareness of the role of analysis to inform appreciation and understanding of poetry; be able to
- identify and discuss the main analytical concepts used in analyzing poetry.

What is the point of analyzing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything the more interesting it becomes: listening to music or looking at paintings with someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see – or what we’re reading – is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure. That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it.

But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another: why, for example, did the poet choose to write a sonnet rather than an ode, a ballad, or a villanelle? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time. In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice. Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.

Activity 1

Click on William Blake’s “Tyger” to read and compare the two versions of the poem. The one on the left is a draft; the other is the final published version.
Discussion

The most obvious difference between the two is that stanza 4 of the draft does not survive in the published version, and an entirely new stanza, “When the stars threw down their spears,” appears in the finished poem. Significantly, this introduces the idea of “the Lamb,” a dramatic contrast to the tiger, as well as the idea of a “he” who made the lamb. One similarity between the draft and final version is that each is made up entirely of unanswered questions. But if you look at the manuscript stanza 5, you can see revisions from “What” to “Where,” and the struggle with the third line, where Blake eventually decided that the idea of an arm was redundant, subsumed in the notions of grasping and clasping. The two rhyme words are decided—grasp/clasp—but in which order should they come? ‘Clasp’ is a less aggressive word than ‘grasp’; ‘clasp’ is not quite as gentle as an embrace, but it is closer to embracing than ‘grasp’ is—so it must be for deliberate effect that we end up with ‘What dread grasp/Dare its deadly terrors clasp?’

It is rare to have manuscript drafts to examine in this way, but I hope that this convinces you of the kind of attention writers pay to word choice. Let us take one more example. Think about this first stanza of Thomas Hardy’s ‘Neutral Tones’ (1867):

We stood by a pond that winter day,

And the sun was white, as though chidden of God, And a

few leaves lay on the starving sod;

—They had fallen from an ash, and were gray. (Gibson, 1976, p. 12)

Notice that, in the last line, ‘oak’ or ‘elm’ would work just as well as far as the rhythm or music of the line is concerned, but ‘ash’ has extra connotations of grayness, of something burnt out, dead, finished (‘ashes to ashes’, too, perhaps?), all of which contribute to the mood that Hardy conveys in a way that ‘oak’ or ‘elm’ wouldn’t.

To return to my original question then, ‘what is the point of analyzing poetry?’, one answer is that only an analytical approach can help us arrive at an informed appreciation and understanding of the poem. Whether we like a poem or not, we should be able to recognize the craftsmanship that has gone into making it, the ways in which stylistic techniques and devices have worked to create meaning. General readers may be entirely happy to find a poem pleasing, or unsatisfactory, without stopping to ask why.

But studying poetry is a different matter and requires some background understanding of what those stylistic techniques might be, as well as an awareness of constraints and conventions within which poets have written throughout different periods of history.

You may write poetry yourself. If so, you probably know only too well how difficult it is to produce something you feel really expresses what you want to convey. Writing an essay presents enough problems – a poem is a different matter, but certainly no easier. Thinking of poetry as a discipline and a craft which, to some extent, can be learned, is another useful way of approaching analysis. After all, how successful are emotional outpourings on paper? Words one might scribble down in the heat of an intense moment may have some validity in conveying that intensity, but in general might they not be more satisfactory if they were later revised? My own feeling is that a remark Wordsworth made 200 years ago has become responsible for a number of misconceptions about what poetry should do. In the
Preface to a volume of poems called *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) he wrote that ‘all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ (Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.85, l.105–6). The second time he uses the same phrase he says something that I think is often forgotten today: ‘poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity’ (my italics) (ibid., p. 95, l.l.557–8). Notice the significant time lapse implied there – the idea that, however powerful or spontaneous the emotion, it needs to be carefully considered before you start writing. He goes on:

> The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually reproduced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins.

You don’t have to agree with Wordsworth about what poetry is or how best to achieve it. (Would you always want a poem to express powerful emotion, for example? I referred to Hardy’s ‘Neutral Tones’ above, where the whole point is that neither of the two characters described feels anything much at all.) But the idea of contemplation is a useful and important one: it implies distance, perhaps detachment, but above all re-creation, not the thing itself. And if we try to re-create something, we must choose our methods and our words carefully in order to convey what we experienced as closely as possible. A word of warning though: writers do not always aim to express personal experiences; often a persona is created.

The poet Ezra Pound offered this advice to other poets in an essay written in 1913: ‘Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something’ (Gray, 1990, p. 56). And in the 1950s William Carlos Williams advised, ‘cut and cut again whatever you write’. In his opinion, the ‘test of the artist is to be able to revise without showing a seam’ (loc. cit.). That sewing image he uses appeals to me particularly because it stresses the notion of skilled craftsmanship. Pound and Williams were American, writing long after Wordsworth, but, as you can see, like countless other poets they too reflected very seriously on their own poetic practice. I hope this helps convince you that as students we owe it to the poems we read to give them close analytical attention.

**Note About Organization**

In what follows, section headings like ‘Rhyme’, ‘Rhythm’, ‘Line lengths and line endings’, ‘Alliteration’, and so on, are intended to act as signposts to help you (if terms are unfamiliar, look them up in the glossary at the end). But these headings indicate only the main technique being discussed. While it is something we need to attempt, it is very difficult to try to isolate devices in this way – to separate out, for example, the effects of rhythm from rhyme. This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t look for particular techniques at work in a poem, but we need to be aware that they will be interdependent and the end product effective or not because of the way such elements work together.

As you work through this reading, don’t be discouraged if your response to exercises differs from mine. Remember that I had the advantage of choosing my own examples and that I’ve long been familiar with the poems I’ve used. On a daily basis, we probably read much less poetry than we do prose. This is perhaps one reason why many people say they find poetry difficult – unfamiliarity and lack of practice. But, like anything else, the more effort we put in, the wider the range of experiences we have to draw on. I hope that when you come across an unfamiliar extract in the discussions that follow you might decide to look up the whole poem on your own account, widening your own experience and enjoying it, too.
Remember that language changes over the years. I’ve deliberately chosen to discuss poems from different periods, and given dates of first publication. Do keep this in mind, especially as you may find some examples more accessible than others. The idiom and register of a poem written in the eighteenth century will usually be quite different from one written in the twentieth. Different verse forms are popular at different times: while sonnets have been written for centuries, they were especially fashionable in Elizabethan times, for example. Don’t expect to find free verse written much before the twentieth century.

If you are working on a poem, it can be a good idea to print it, maybe even enlarge it, and then write anything you find particularly striking in the margins. Use highlighters or colored pens to underline repetitions and link rhyme words. Patterns may well emerge that will help you understand the way the poem develops. Make the poems your own in this way, and then, if you are the kind of person who doesn’t mind writing in books, you can insert notes in a more restrained way in the margins of your book.

If you prefer to work on your computer, you can do a similar thing by using an annotation tool on your word processor.

Whatever you do, always ask yourself what the effect of a particular technique that you identify is. Noticing an unusual choice of words, a particular rhyme scheme or use of alliteration is an important first step, but you need to take another one. Unless you go on to say why what you have noticed is effective, what it contributes to the rest of the poem, how it endorses or changes things, then you are doing less than half the job. Get into the habit of asking yourself questions, even if you can’t always answer them satisfactorily.

Rhythm

All speech has rhythm because we naturally stress some words or syllables more than others. The rhythm can sometimes be very regular and pronounced, as in a children’s nursery rhyme – ‘JACK and JILL went UP the HILL’ – but even in the most ordinary sentence the important words are given more stress. In poetry, rhythm is extremely important: patterns are deliberately created and repeated for varying effects. The rhythmical pattern of a poem is called its meter, and we can analyze, or ‘scan’ lines of poetry to identify stressed and unstressed syllables. In marking the text to show this, the mark ‘/’ is used to indicate a stressed syllable, and ‘x’ to indicate an unstressed syllable. Each complete unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a ‘foot’, which usually has one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.
The most common foot in English is known as the iamb, which is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (x/). Many words in English are iambic: a simple example is the word ‘forgot’. When we say this, the stresses naturally fall in the sequence:

\[
\text{x/}
\]

‘forgot’.

Iambic rhythm is in fact the basic sound pattern in ordinary English speech. If you say the following line aloud you will hear what I mean:

\[
\text{x/x/x/x/x/x/x/}
\]

I went across the road and bought a pair of shoes.

The next most common foot is the trochee, a stressed syllable (or ‘beat’, if you like) followed by an unstressed one (/x), as in the word

\[
/\text{x/}
\]

‘mountain’.

Both the iamb and the trochee have two syllables, the iamb being a ‘rising’ rhythm and the trochee a ‘falling’ rhythm. Another two-syllable foot known as the spondee has two equally stressed beats (/ /), as in

\[
_//_
\]

‘blue spurt’.

Other important feet have three syllables. The most common are the anapest (x x /) and the dactyl (/ x x), which are triple rhythms, rising and falling respectively, as in the words

\[
\text{x x/} \text{ x/} \text{x/}
\]

‘unimpressed’ and ‘probably’.

Here are some fairly regular examples of the four main kinds of meter used in poetry. (I have separated the feet by using a vertical slash.) You should say the lines aloud, listening for the stress patterns and noting how the ‘beats’ fall on particular syllables or words.

\textit{Iambic meter}

\[
\text{x/} \text{x/} \text{x/} \text{x/} \text{x/}
\]

The cur- | few tolls | the knell | of part- | ing day

\textit{Trochaic meter}

\[
/ \text{x/} \text{x/} \text{x/}
\]

Tiger | tiger | burning | bright

\textit{Anapestic meter}

\[
\text{x x/} \text{x x/} \text{x x/} \text{x x/} \text{x x/}
\]

She is far | from the land | where her young | hero sleeps

\textit{Dactylic meter}
The other technical point that you need to know about is the way the lengths of lines of verse are described. This is done according to the number of feet they contain, and the names given to different lengths of lines are as follows:

- monometer a line of one foot
- dimeter a line of two feet
- trimeter a line of three feet
- tetrameter a line of four feet
- pentameter a line of five feet
- hexameter a line of six feet
- heptameter a line of seven feet
- octameter a line of eight feet.

By far the most widely used of these are the tetrameter and the pentameter. If you look back at the four lines of poetry given as examples above, you can count the feet. You will see that the first one has five feet, so it is an iambic pentameter line; the second one has four feet, so it is a trochaic tetrameter line; the fourth and fifth also have four feet, so are anapestic and dactylic tetrameter lines respectively. Lines do not always have exactly the ‘right’ number of beats. Sometimes a pentameter line will have an extra ‘beat’, as in the famous line from *Hamlet*, ‘To be or not to be: that is the question’; where the ‘tion’ of question is an eleventh, unstressed beat. (It is worth asking yourself why Shakespeare wrote the line like this. Why did he not write what would have been a perfectly regular ten-syllable line, such as ‘The question is, to be or not to be’?)

Having outlined some of the basic meters of English poetry, it is important to say at once that very few poems would ever conform to a perfectly regular metrical pattern. The effect of that would be very boring indeed: imagine being restricted to using only iambic words, or trying to keep up a regular trochaic rhythm. Poets therefore often include trochaic or anapestic or dactylic words or phrases within what are basically iambic lines, in order to make them more interesting and suggestive, and to retain normal pronunciation. Here is a brief example from Shakespeare to show you what I mean. I have chosen a couple of lines spoken by Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Act 1, scene 2, and have marked this first version to show you the basic iambic meter:

```
Woman much missed how you call to me, call to me
```

If you say the lines out loud in this regular way you can hear that the effect is very unnatural. Here is one way the lines might be scanned to show how the stresses would fall in speech (though there are other ways of scanning them):

```
/ / x / x x x x x / my father loved sir rowland as his soul,
/ / / / x x x x x x / x / x / x / x / And all the world was of my father’s mind.
```
It must be emphasized that there is no need to feel that you must try to remember all the technical terms I have been introducing here. The purpose has been to help you to become aware of the importance of rhythmic effects in poetry, and it can be just as effective to try to describe these in your own words. The thing to hang on to when writing about the rhythm of a poem is that, as Ezra Pound put it, ‘Rhythm MUST have meaning’: ‘It can’t be merely a careless dash off with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tumty tumpty tum tum ta’ (quoted in Gray, 1990, p. 56). There are occasions, of course, when a tum-ty-ty-tum rhythm may be appropriate, and ‘have meaning’. When Tennyson wrote ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, he recreated the sound, pace, and movement of horses thundering along with the emphatic dactyls of ‘Half a league, half a league, half a league onward / Into the valley of death rode the six hundred’. But for a very different example we might take a short two-line poem by Pound himself. This time there is no fixed meter: like much twentieth-century poetry, this poem is in ‘free verse’. Its title is ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (the Metro being the Paris underground railway), and it was written in 1916:

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Here you can see that the rhythm plays a subtle part in conveying the meaning. The poem is comparing the faces of people in a crowded underground to petals that have fallen on to a wet bough. The rhythm not only highlights the key words in each line, but produces much of the emotional feeling of the poem by slowing down the middle words of the first line and the final three words of the second.

For our final example of rhythm I’ve chosen a passage from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).

**Activity 2**

Take a look at this excerpt from *An Essay on Criticism*. Read it aloud if you can. Listen to the rhythm, and identify why the rhythm is appropriate to the meaning.

**Discussion**

Pope here uses a basic structure of iambic pentameters with variations, so that the lines sound as if they have a different pace, faster or slower, depending on what is being described. It is not just rhythm that contributes to the effect here: rhyme and alliteration (successive words beginning with the same sound) recreate smooth, rough, slow and swift movement. Rhythm is entirely dependent on word choice, but is also influenced by other interdependent stylistic devices. Pope’s lines enact what they describe simply because of the care that has gone into choosing the right words. It doesn’t matter if you don’t recognise the classical allusions: from the descriptions it is clear that Ajax is a strong man and Camilla is quick and light. If you count the beats of each line, you’ll notice that, in spite of the variety of sound and effect, all have five stresses, except the last, which has six. Strangely enough it is the last and longest line that creates an impression of speed. How is this achieved? Try to hear the lines by reading them again out loud.

There is really only one way, and that is through the words chosen to represent movement: the repeated
‘s’ sounds associated with Camilla trip swiftly off the tip of the tongue, whereas Ajax’s lines demand real physical effort from mouth, lips, and tongue. You will get a much stronger sense of this if you form the words in this way, even if you are unable to say them out loud. In an exam, for instance, silent articulation of a poem will help you grasp many poetic techniques and effects that may otherwise be missed.

This extract from Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*, like the whole poem, is written in rhyming couplets (lines rhyming in pairs). They confer a formal, regular quality to the verse. The punctuation helps to control the way in which we read: notice that there is a pause at the end of each line, either a comma, a semi-colon, or a full stop. This use of the end-stopped line is characteristic of eighteenth-century heroic couplets (iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs), where the aim was to reproduce classical qualities of balance, harmony, and proportion.

Get into the habit of looking at rhyme words. Are any of Pope’s rhymes particularly interesting here? One thing I noticed was what is known as poetic inversion. The rhyme ‘shore’/’roar’ is clearly important to the sound sense of the verse, but the more natural word order (were this ordinary speech) would be ‘The hoarse rough verse should roar like the torrent’. Had he written this, Pope would have lost the sound qualities of the rhyme ‘shore’/’roar’. He would have had to find a word such as ‘abhorrent’ to rhyme with ‘torrent’ and the couplet would have had a very different meaning. He would also have lost the rhythm of the line, in spite of the fact that the words are exactly the same.

Before we leave *An Essay on Criticism*, did you notice that Pope’s subject in this poem is really poetry itself? Like Wordsworth, Pound, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom I’ve quoted earlier, Pope too was concerned with poetry as a craft.

**Alliteration**

Alliteration is the term used to describe successive words beginning with the same sound – usually, then, with the same letter.

To illustrate this I would like to use a stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough’s poem, ‘Natura naturans’. There is not enough space to quote the whole poem, but to give you some idea of the context of this stanza so that you can more fully appreciate what Clough is doing, it is worth explaining that ‘Natura naturans’ describes the sexual tension between a young man and woman who sit next to each other in a railway carriage. They have not been introduced, and they neither speak nor exchange so much as a glance. The subject matter and its treatment is unusual and also extraordinarily frank for the time of writing (about 1849), but you need to know what is being described in order to appreciate the physicality of the lines I quote.
**Activity 3**

Read the attached stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough’s poem “*Natura Naturans*” and consider the following questions:

1. What is the single most striking technique used, and what are the effects?
2. How would you describe the imagery, and what does it contribute to the overall effect?

**Discussion**

1. Visually the use of alliteration is striking, particularly in the first line and almost equally so in the second. If you took the advice above about paying attention to the physical business of articulating the words too, you should be in a good position to discriminate between the rapidity of the flies and the heavier movement of the bees, and to notice how tactile the language is. The effect is actually to create sensuality in the stanza.
2. Notice that though we begin with flies, bees and rooks, all of which are fairly common flying creatures, we move to the more romantic lark with its ‘wild’ song, and then to the positively exotic gazelle, leopard, and dolphin. From the rather homely English air (flies, bees, birds), we move to foreign locations ‘Libyan dell’ and ‘Indian glade’, and from there to ‘tropic seas’. (Cod in the North Sea would have very different connotations from dolphins in the tropics.) Air, earth, and sea are all invoked to help express the variety of changing highly charged erotic feelings that the speaker remembers. The images are playful and preposterous, joyfully expressing the familiar poetic subject of sexual attraction and arousal in a way that makes it strange and new. Notice that in each case the image is more effective because the alliteration emphasizes it.

**Rhyme**

If a poem rhymes, then considering how the rhyme works is always important.

Rhyme schemes can be simple or highly intricate and complex; it will always be worth considering why a particular rhyme pattern was chosen and trying to assess its effects.

**Activity 4**

Read “*Love from the North*” (1862) by Christina Rossetti. What is the poem about, and how does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

**Discussion**

‘Love From the North’ tells a simple story. A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows. The form of the poem is very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight 4-line stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is ‘nay’, there is only one rhyme sound throughout. There are more internal rhymes relying on the same repeated sound, however, aren’t there? Look at the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 where ‘say’ ‘nay’; ‘nay’ ‘nay’; ‘say’ ‘nay’; ‘yea’ ‘nay’; and ‘say’ ‘nay’ appear. In the second stanza, ‘gay’ occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have ‘yea’ in line 3. What is the effect of this?
Do you think the effect might be to help over-simplify the story? Clearly the woman has doubts about the man from the south’s devotion: he ‘never dared’ to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he ‘saddens’ when she does, is ‘gay’ when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day she thinks: ‘It’s quite too late to think of nay’. But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the ‘links of love’ imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has ‘neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish’ to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the ‘book and bell’ with which she’s made to stay?

Certainly they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem – witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words ‘Till now’ particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free?

How important is it to resolve such questions? It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form – eight quatrains (or four-line stanzas) – and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships? Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren’t feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward?

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events – part of the convention is that ballads don’t go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word ‘nay’ chiming throughout ‘Love From the North’ is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men – the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike? After all, ‘nay’ is the sound which gives the poem striking unity and coherence.

Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’ (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn’t a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti’s quatrains. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, the first two of which are reproduced for the following activity:

**Activity 5**

Read the first two stanzas of Keats’s “*Eve of St Agnes.*” How would you describe the rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

**Discussion**

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns, don’t they? While ‘was’/’grass’ in the first stanza and ‘man’/’wan’ in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent), the first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said – and, as I have been arguing all along, it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular
interest. To give a full answer to my own question, I’d really need to consider the function of rhyme throughout the poem. It would not be necessary to describe what happens in each stanza, but picking out particular pertinent examples would help me argue a case. With only the first two stanzas to work with, I could say that, if nothing else, the intricate rhyme pattern seems appropriate not only for the detailed descriptions but also for the medieval, slightly gothic setting of the chapel where the holy man prays.

Activity 6

Read the extract from Tennyson’s “Mariana” (1830). Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

Read the extract and consider the following questions:

1. Describe the rhyme in the stanza from Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’.
2. What is the first stanza about?

Discussion

1. As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as ‘a b a b c d e f e f. You might notice too that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasise lines that rhyme with each other: usually the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line ‘I would that I were dead’ (this is known as a refrain) so – as in Christina Rossetti’s ‘Love From the North’ – a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.
2. We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. The ‘dreary’/’aweary’ and ‘dead’/’said’ rhymes, which, if you read the rest of the poem, you will see are repeated in each stanza, convey her dejection and express the boredom of endless waiting. As with the stanzas from Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’, there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana’s mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.

Poetic Inversion

Poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. We noticed Pope’s poetic inversion in An Essay on Criticism and saw how the rhyme was intimately linked to the rhythm of the verse. The song ‘Dancing in the Street’, first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in the 1960s, does violence to word order in the interests of rhyme – ‘There’ll be dancing in the street/ A chance new folk to meet’ – but, because the words are sung to a driving rhythm, we are unlikely to notice how awkward they are. There’s a convention that we recognise, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally re-writing the line as ‘a chance to
meet new people’. (‘People’ rather than ‘folk’ would be more usual usage for me, but, as with the Pope example, this would mean that the rhythm too would be lost.)

**Poems That Don’t Rhyme**

Are poems that don’t rhyme prose? Not necessarily. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a novelist rather than a poet, and T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), known particularly for his poetry, both wrote descriptive pieces best described as ‘prose poems’. These look like short prose passages since there is no attention to line lengths or layout on the page, as there was, for example, in ‘Mariana’. When you study Shakespeare you will come across blank verse. ‘Blank’ here means ‘not rhyming’, but the term ‘blank verse’ is used specifically to describe verse in unrhyming iambic pentameters.

Although iambic pentameters resemble our normal speech patterns, in ordinary life we speak in prose. You’ll notice if you look through Shakespeare’s plays that blank verse is reserved for kings, nobles, heroes and heroines. They may also speak in prose, as lesser characters do, but commoners don’t ever have speeches in blank verse. Shakespeare – and other playwrights like him – used the form to indicate status. It is important to recognise this convention, which would have been understood by his contemporaries – writers, readers, and audiences alike. So choosing to write a poem in blank verse is an important decision: it will elevate the subject. One such example is Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* (1667), a long poem in twelve Books describing Creation, Adam and Eve’s temptation, disobedience and expulsion from Paradise. It sets out to justify the ways of God to man, so blank verse is entirely appropriate. This great epic was in Wordsworth’s mind when he chose the same form for his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*.

**Activity 7**

Read and compare these extracts. One is from Book XIII of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth is walking up Mount Snowdon; the other is from “The Idiot Boy,” one of his *Lyrical Ballads*. What effects are achieved by the different forms?

**Discussion**

Both poems use iambic meter – an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The extract from *The Prelude* uses iambic pentameters, five metrical feet in each line, whereas ‘The Idiot Boy’ (like the ballad, ‘Love From the North’) is in tetrameters, only four, establishing a more sing-song rhythm. Other stylistic techniques contribute to the difference in tone too: the language of *The Prelude* is formal (Wordsworth’s ‘Ascending’ rather than ‘going up’), whereas ‘The Idiot Boy’ uses deliberately homely diction, and rhyme. Three simple rhyme words ring out throughout the 92 stanzas of the latter: ‘Foy’, ‘boy’ and ‘joy’ stand at the heart of the poem, expressing the mother’s pride in her son. The moon features in each extract. In *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth climbs, the ground lightens, as it does in The Old Testament before a prophet appears. Far from being a meaningless syllable to fill the rhythm of a line, ‘lo’ heightens the religious parallel, recalling the biblical ‘Lo, I bring you tidings of great joy’: this episode from *The Prelude* describes a moment of spiritual illumination. Wordsworth’s intentions in these two poems were quite different, and the techniques reflect that.

Other poems that don’t use rhyme are discussed later (‘Wherever I Hang’; ‘Mona Lisa’; ‘Poem’). Notice that they use a variety of rhythms, and because of that none can be described as blank verse.
Voice

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice we hear when we read?

Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew’s poem, ‘The Farmer’s Bride’ (1916) begins like this:

*Three summers since I chose a maid,*
*Too young maybe – but more’s to do*
*At harvest-time than bide and woo.*
*When us was wed she turned afraid Of love and me and all things human;*

(Warner, 1981, pp. 1–2)

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem. Some of the most well-known created characters – or personae – in poetry are Browning’s dramatic monologues.

**Activity 8**

Consider the opening lines from three Robert Browning poems. Who do you think is speaking?

**Discussion**

Well, the first speaker isn’t named, but we can infer that, like Brother Lawrence whom he hates, he’s a monk. The second must be a Duke since he refers to his ‘last Duchess’ and, if we read to the end of the third poem, we discover that the speaker is a man consumed with such jealousy that he strangles his beloved Porphyria with her own hair. Each of the poems is written in the first person (‘my heart’s abhorrence’; ‘That’s my last Duchess’; *I* listened with heart fit to break’). None of the characters Browning created in these poems bears any resemblance to him: the whole point of a dramatic monologue is the creation of a character who is most definitely not the poet. Charlotte Mew’s poem can be described in the same way.
Line Lengths and Line Endings

Read the following prose extract taken from Walter Pater’s discussion of the Mona Lisa, written in 1893, and then complete the activity:

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Activity 9

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935 (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no regular rhythm either, though I’m sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

Discussion

Of course, there is no right answer to this exercise, but you should compare your version to Yeats’s, printed below, to see if you made similar decisions.

She is older than the rocks among which she sits;
Like the Vampire,
She has been dead many times,
And learned the secrets of the grave;
And has been a diver in deep seas,
And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;
And, as Leda,
Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as St Anne,
Was the mother of Mary;
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
And lives
Only in the delicacy
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments, And tinged the eyelids and the hands.

View the document as a PDF.

I wonder whether you used upper case letters for the first word of each line, as Yeats did? You may have changed the punctuation, or perhaps have left it out altogether. Like Yeats, you may have used ‘And’ at
the beginnings of lines to draw attention to the repetitions: nine of the lines begin in this way, emphasising the way the clauses pile up, defining and redefining the mysterious Mona Lisa. Two lines begin with ‘She’: while there was no choice about the first, beginning the third in the same way focuses attention on her right at the start of the poem. Yeats has used Pater’s punctuation to guide his line endings in all but two places: lines 13 and 14 run on – a stylistic device known as enjambment. The effect is an interesting interaction between eyes and ears. While we may be tempted to read on without pausing to find the sense, the line endings and white space of the page impose pauses on our reading, less than the commas and semi-colons that mark off the other lines, but significant nevertheless.

Yeats’s arrangement of the words makes the structure and movement of Pater’s long sentence clearer than it appears when written as prose. The poem begins with age – she is ‘older than the rocks’ – and refers to ‘Vampire’, death, and ‘grave’ in the first lines. The decision to single out the two words ‘And lives’ in a line by themselves towards the end of the poem sets them in direct opposition to the opening; we have moved from great age and living death to life. The arrangement of lines 8–11 highlights her links with both pagan and Christian religions: the Mona Lisa was the mother of Helen of Troy and the Virgin Mary. The wisdom and knowledge she has acquired is worn lightly, nothing more than ‘the sound of lyres and flutes’, apparent only in the ‘delicacy’ of colour on ‘eyelids and hands’.

The aim of the preceding exercise was to encourage you to think about form and structure even when a poem does not appear to follow a conventional pattern. Because you have now ‘written’ a poem and had the opportunity to compare it with someone else’s version of the same words, you should begin to realise the importance of decisions about where exactly to place a word for maximum effect, and how patterns can emerge which will control our reading when, for example, successive lines begin with repetitions. It should have made you think about the importance of the beginnings of lines, as well as line endings. What has been achieved by using a short line here, a longer one there? How do these decisions relate to what is being said? These are questions that can usefully be asked of any poem.

Earlier, discussing the extract from Pope’s An Essay on Criticism, I asked you to concentrate on the sound qualities of the poetry. Here, I want you to consider the visual impact of the poem on the page. It is a good thing to be aware of what a complex task reading is, and to be alive to the visual as well as the aural qualities of the verse.

Activity 10

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935 (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no regular rhythm either, though I’m sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

Further exercise: taking Grace Nichols’s ‘Wherever I Hang’, discussed in Activity 10, you could reverse the process carried out in the previous exercise by writing out the poem as prose. Then, covering up the original, you could rewrite it as verse and compare your version with the original.
Comparing and Contrasting

Often you will find that an assignment asks you to ‘compare and contrast’ poems. There’s a very good reason for this, for often it is only by considering different treatments of similar subjects that we become aware of a range of possibilities, and begin to understand why particular choices have been made. You will have realised that often in the previous discussions I’ve used a similar strategy, showing, for example, how we can describe the rhyme scheme of ‘Love From the North’ as simple once we have looked at the more intricate patterning of Keats’s ‘The Eve of St Agnes’ or Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’. Anne Brontë’s ‘Home’ and Grace Nichols’s ‘Wherever I Hang’ treat the subject of exile in quite different ways, and looking at one can sharpen our understanding of what the other does.

Activity 11

Read the opening lines from these two poems commemorating deaths. What can you explain why they sound so very different?

Discussion

If I had to identify one thing, I would say that the first begins more elaborately and with a more formal tone than the second. ‘Felix Randal’ tends to use language in an unusual way, but you would probably agree that the first sentence is quite straightforward and sounds colloquial (or informal), as if the speaker has just overheard someone talking about Randal’s death and wants to confirm his impression. ‘Lycidas’ opens quite differently. It is not immediately apparent what evergreens have to do with anything (in fact they work to establish an appropriately melancholy atmosphere or tone), and it isn’t until line 8 that we learn of a death. The word ‘dead’ is repeated, and the following line tells us that Lycidas was a young man. While ‘Felix Randal’ has an immediacy, the speaker of ‘Lycidas’ seems to find it hard to get going.

Both poems are elegies – poems written to commemorate death – and both poets are aware of writing within this convention, although they treat it differently.

Activity 12

What do the titles of the poems used in Activity 13 tell us about each poem, and how might they help us understand the different uses of the elegiac convention?

Discussion
I think it would be apparent to most readers that ‘Felix Randall’ is simply a man’s name, while ‘Lycidas’ is more mysterious. In fact Lycidas is a traditional pastoral name, but unless you know something about the classical pastoral tradition it might mean very little to you. The young man whose death Milton was commemorating was actually called Edward King, but, at the time he was writing, elegies were formal, public and impersonal poems rather than private expressions of grief. ‘Lycidas’ commemorates a member of a prominent family rather than a close friend of the poet’s. Over two hundred years later, Hopkins, while working loosely within the same elegiac convention, adapts it. Felix Randal is an ordinary working man, not a public figure. In the seventeenth century it would have been unlikely that he would have been considered worthy of a poem like this.

If you were making a special study of elegies, there would be a great deal more to say. That’s not the idea here, though. The point is that by comparing and contrasting the tone of the opening lines and the titles, and considering when the poems were written, we have come up with a number of significant differences.

**Activity 13**

Read this [poem by Robert Browning](#) carefully. Who is speaking, and who is being addressed?

**Discussion**

From the evidence of the poem we know that the speaker once walked across a moor, found an eagle’s feather, and has a high regard for the poet Shelley (1792–1822). The person being addressed is not named, but we discover that he (or she) once met Shelley, and this alone confers status by association. The word ‘you’ (‘your’ in one instance) is repeated in 6 out of the first 8 lines. ‘You’ becomes a rhyme word at the end of the second line, so when we reach the word ‘new’ in line four – one of the two lines in the first stanzas that doesn’t contain ‘you’ – the echo supplies the deficiency. ‘You’ clearly represents an important focus in the first half of the poem, but who exactly is ‘you’?

Thinking about this apparently straightforward question of who is being addressed takes us into an important area of critical debate: for each one of us who has just read the poem has, in one sense, become a person who not only knows who Shelley is (which may not necessarily be the case) but lived
when he did, met him, listened to him, and indeed exchanged at least a couple of words with him. Each of us reads the poem as an individual, but the poem itself constructs a reader who is not identical to any of us. We are so used to adopting ‘reading’ roles dictated by texts like this that often we don’t even notice the way in which the text has manipulated us.

Activity 14

Now read the Robert Browning poem again, this time asking yourself if the speaking voice changes in the last two stanzas, and if the person who is being addressed remains the same.

Discussion

If the first half of the poem is characterised by the repetition of ‘you’ and the sense of an audience that pronoun creates, then the second half seems quite different in content and tone. The speaker is trying to find a parallel in his experience to make sense of and explain his feeling of awe; the change of tone is subtle. Whereas someone is undoubtedly being addressed directly in the first stanza, in the third and fourth, readers overhear – as if the speaker is talking to himself.

At first the connection between the man who met Shelley and the memory of finding an eagle’s feather may not be obvious, but there is a point of comparison. As stanza 2 explains, part of the speaker’s sense of wonder stems from the fact that time did not stand still: ‘you were living before that, / And also you are living after’. The moor in stanza 3, like the listener, is anonymous – it has ‘a name of its own … no doubt’ – but where it is or what it is called is unimportant: only one ‘hand’s-breadth’ is memorable, the spot that ‘shines alone’ where the feather was found. The poem is about moments that stand out in our memories while the ordinary daily stuff of life fades. It also acknowledges that we don’t all value the same things.

Activity 15

Take another look at the poem. How would you describe its form?

Discussion

The structure of the poem is perfectly balanced: of the four quatrains, two deal with each memory, so, although the nature of each seems quite different, implicitly the form invites us to compare them. Think about the way in which Browning introduces the eagle feather. How does he convince us that this is a rare find?

To begin with, the third and fourth stanzas make up one complete sentence, with a colon at the end of the third announcing the fourth; this helps to achieve a sense of building up to something important. Then we move from the visual image of a large space of moor to the very circumscribed place where the feather is found, but the reason why this ‘hand’s-breadth’ shines out is delayed for the next two lines ‘For there I picked up on the heather’ – yes? what? – ‘And there I put inside my breast’ – well? – ‘A moulted feather’, ah (and notice the internal rhyme there of ‘feather’ with ‘heather’ which draws attention to and emphasises the harmony of the moment), and then the word ‘feather’ is repeated and expanded: ‘an eagle-feather’ Clearly the feather of no other bird would do, for ultimately the
comparison is of eagle to the poet; Browning knows Shelley through his poetry as he knows the eagle through its
feather, and that feather presents a striking visual image.

There is an immediacy about the conversational opening of the poem which, I have suggested, deliberately moves
into a more contemplative tone, possibly in the second stanza (think about it), but certainly by the third. We have
considered some of the poetic techniques that Browning employs to convince us of the rarity of his find in the third
and fourth stanzas. You might like to think more analytically about the word sounds, not just the rhyme but, for
example, the repeated ‘ae’ sound in ‘breadth’ ‘heather’ ‘breast’ and ‘feather’. What, however, do you make of the
tone of the last line? Try saying the last lines of each stanza out loud. Whether you can identify the meter with
technical language or not is beside the point. The important thing is that ‘Well, I forget the rest’ sounds deliberately
lame. After the intensity of two extraordinary memories, everything else pales into insignificance and, to reiterate
this, the rhythm tails off. While the tone throughout is informal, the last remark is deliberately casual.

Glossary

Alliteration

repetition of sounds, usually the first letters of successive words, or words that are close
together. Alliteration usually applies only to consonants.

Anapest

see under foot.

Assonance

repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds.

Ballad

originally a song which tells a story, often involving dialogue. Characteristically, the
storyteller’s own feelings are not expressed.

Caesura

strong pause in a line of verse, usually appearing in the middle of a line and marked
with a comma, semi-colon, or a full stop.

Couplet

pair of rhymed lines, often used as a way of rounding off a sonnet; hence the term ‘closing
couplet’.

Dactyl

see under foot.

Dialogue

spoken exchange between characters, usually in drama and fiction but also
sometimes in poetry.

Diction

writer’s choice of words. Poetic diction might be described, for instance, as formal or
informal, elevated or colloquial.

Elegy

poem of loss, usually mourning the death of a public figure, or someone close to the poet.

Ellipsis

omission of words from a sentence to achieve brevity and compression.

Enjambment

the use of run-on lines in poetry. Instead of stopping or pausing at the end of a line
of poetry, we have to carry on reading until we complete the meaning in a later line. The term
comes from the French for ‘striding’.

Epic

a long narrative poem dealing with events on a grand scale, often with a hero above
average in qualities and exploits.

Epigram

witty, condensed expression. The closing couplet in some of Shakespeare’s sonnets is often
described as anepigram.

Foot

a unit of meter with a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. In the examples
that follow, a stressed syllable is indicated by ‘/’, and an unstressed syllable by ‘x’: anapest:
xx/; dactyl: /xx; iamb: x/; spondee: //; trochee: /x
Heroic couplet

Iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs, most commonly used for satiric or didactic poetry, and particularly favoured in the eighteenth century.

Iamb

*see under* foot.

Iambic pentameter a line consisting of five iambs.

Imagery

special use of language in a way that evokes sense impressions (usually visual).

Many poetic images function as mental pictures that give shape and appeal to something otherwise vague and abstract; for example, ‘yonder before us lie/Deserts of vast Eternity’. Simile and metaphor are two types of imagery.

Metaphor

image in which one thing is substituted for another, or the quality of one object is identified with another. The sun, for Shakespeare, becomes ‘the eye of heaven’.

(Often, from the Greek *metron*, ‘measure’) measurement of a line of poetry, including its length and its pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. There are different meter in poetry.

Most sonnets, for example, written in English are divided into lines of ten syllables with five stresses – a measure known as pentameter (from the Greek *pente* for ‘five’). The sonnet also tends to use a line (known as the iambic line) in which an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed one, as in this line: ‘If I should die, think only this of me’. Most sonnets, then are written in iambic pentameters.

Narrative

the telling of a series of events (either true or fictitious). The person relating these events is the narrator. However, it is often more usual in poetry to refer to ‘the speaker’.

Octave

group of eight lines of poetry, often forming the first part of a sonnet.

Ode

a poem on a serious subject, usually written in an elevated formal style; often written to commemorate public events.

Onomatopoeia

a word that seems to imitate the sound or sounds associated with the object or action, for example, ‘cuckoo’.

Ottava rima

a poem in eight-line stanzas, rhyming a b a b a b c c.

Personification

writing about something not human as if it were a person, for example ‘Busy old fool, unruly Sun,/Why dost thou thus,/Through windows and through curtains call on us?’.

Poetic inversion

reversing the order of normal speech in order to make the words fit a particular rhythm, or rhyme, or both.

Pun

double meaning or ambiguity in a word, often employed in a witty way. Puns are often associated with wordplay.

Quatrain

group of four lines of poetry, usually rhymed.

Refrain

a line or phrase repeated throughout a poem, sometimes with variations, often at the end of each stanza.

Rhyme

echo of a similar sound, usually at the end of a line of poetry. Occasionally, internal rhymes can be found, as in: ‘Sister, my sister, O fleet, sweet swallow’.

Rhyme scheme

pattern of rhymes established in a poem. The pattern of rhymes in a quatrain, for instance, might be ‘a b a b’ or ‘a b b a’.

Rhythm

the pattern of beats or stresses in a line creating a sense of movement. Sestet: group of six lines of poetry, often forming the second part of a sonnet.

Simile

image in which one thing is likened to another. The similarity is usually pointed out with the word ‘like’ or ‘as’: ‘My love is like a red, red rose’.

Sonnet

fourteen iambic pentameter lines with varying rhyme schemes.
Spondees

See under foot.

Syllable

Single unit of pronunciation. ‘Sun’ is one syllable; ‘sunshine’ is two syllables.

Tercet

Group of three lines in poetry, sometimes referred to as a triplet.

Trochee

See under foot.

Turn

Distinctive movement of change in mood or thought or feeling. In the sonnet, the turn usually occurs between the octave and the sestet, though the closing couplet in Shakespeare’s sonnets often constitutes the turn.

Villanelle

An intricate French verse form with some lines repeated, and only two rhyme sounds throughout the five three-line stanzas and the final four-line stanza.

References


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Reading Poetry

How Poems are . . .

In poetry, language is concentrated. Many people have little use for poetry, noting that poetry is useless. It may be true that there is little practical value in reading/writing poetry, but this need not be a reason for dismissing it. Poetry can be tough to “figure out.” In fact, good poetry may be impossible to exhaust of meanings. Like the cliche, though, it’s not the destination but the journey that counts. Don’t expect me to keep sounding like I’m that master martial arts instructor in Kung Fu! What I mean is, poetry confounds our typical ways of looking at the world. It offers something new, or at least it offers new ways to look at everyday things.

There is a way to approach poems so we can experience them—not treat them as riddles. It involves knowing something about poetry’s formal patterns an characteristics. Here is my crash course (which should be review) in poetry. Feel free to use the terms when discussing/writing.

It’s all about the Fulcrum

Here’s a final term: fulcrum. A fulcrum is a turning point, an area where two pieces diverge.

Remember how we started this lecture looking at “one part against another against a silence”? Those turning points are a big deal in Western poetry. Are there fulcrums in NA poetry? Look for fulcrums in the poems we read.

Ciardi’s Usefulness

Poet and critic John Ciardi, in his book How Does A Poem Mean?, mentions that poetry is one thing set against another across a silence. Poetry moves, and there are silences and transition areas. Usually, these transition areas are rather obvious to us. Even if you can see them on the page, your ears hear changes. (Noticing change is what it’s all about, as far as our brain goes.) So, read your poetry aloud. (Well, read their poetry aloud—yours might not sound as good till it’s edited!) Read aloud. Reread the poem, too. Why? Well, rereading allows you to get it better; plus, repetition is an important element of poetry. When we read we participate in the meaning-making, and that’s neat.

Click on the link below get guidance from Poets.org about how to approach poetry as a critical reader.

- “How to Read a Poem” from Poets.org
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Poetry Literary Terms: A Guide

Metre refers to the rhythmic structure of lines of verse. The majority of English verse since Chaucer is inaccentual-syllabic metre, which consists of alternating stressed and unstressed syllables within a fixed total number of syllables in each line. The metrical rhythm is thus the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line. Groups of syllables are known as metrical feet; each line of verse is made up of a set number of feet. Thus:

- **Monometer**: one foot per line
- **Dimeter**: two feet per line
- **Trimeter**: three feet per line
- **Tetrameter**: four feet per line
- **Pentameter**: five feet per line
- **Hexameter**: six feet per line
- **Heptameter**: seven feet per line
- **Octameter**: eight feet per line

Each foot usually consists of a single stressed syllable—though there are some important variations—therefore these patterns correspond to the number of stressed syllables in a line; thus tetrameter has four, pentameter five, etc.

There are two types of metrical feet in English accentual-syllabic metre: **duple metre**, consisting of disyllabic (2-syllable) feet, in which stressed syllables (x) and unstressed syllables (o) alternate in pairs; and **triple metre**, consisting of trisyllabic (3-syllable) feet, in which single stressed syllables are grouped with a pair of unstressed syllables. Duple metre is the metre most commonly found in English verse.

The following metrical feet make up the most common rhythmical patterns:

**Duple metre**:

- **Iamb** (iambic foot): o x *Trochee*  
  (trochaic foot): x o *Spondee*  
  (spondaic foot): x x
- **Pyrrhus** / dibrach (pyrrhic foot): o o

**Triple metre**:

- **Dactyl** (dactylic foot): x o o *Anapaest*  
  (anapaestic foot): o o x *Amphibrach*: o  
  x o
- **Molossus**: x x x
Note that the spondee, pyrrhus and molossus do not usually form the basis for whole lines of verse, but are considered forms of substitution: that is, when a foot required by the metrical pattern being used is replaced by a different sort of foot. A frequently-found example of substitution is the replacement of the initial iamb in an iambic line by a trochee, e.g. (underlined syllables represent stressed syllables):

    In me thou seest the twi\underline{light} of such day As
    after sunset \underline{fadeth} in the west,
    Which \underline{by} and \underline{by} black night doth take away, Death’s
    second \underline{self}, that \underline{seals} up all in rest.

—Shakespeare, Sonnet 73

(The first three lines of this quatrain are perfectly iambic; the initial foot of the fourth line is an example of trochaic substitution, also known as inversion.)

Other variations in metrical rhythm include acephalexis, in which the first syllable of a line that would be expected according to the regular metre of the line, is lacking; and catalexis, in which a line lacks the final syllable expected by its metrical pattern. A masculine ending is a line that ends on a stressed syllable, while a feminine ending is a line that ends on an unstressed syllable.

**Free verse** is poetry that does not conform to any regular metre.

**Examples of different meters and metrical substitutions:** Iambic pentameter:

    We \underline{few}, we \underline{hap}py \underline{few}, we \underline{band} of \underline{brothers}. For
    he \underline{to}day that \underline{sheds} his \underline{blood} with \underline{me} Shall \underline{be} my
    brother; be he \underline{ne’er} so \underline{vile}, This \underline{day} shall \underline{gentle}
    his \underline{condition}.
    Shall \underline{think} themselves \underline{accursed} they \underline{were} not \underline{here}, And
    hold their manhoods \underline{cheap} whiles any speaks That \underline{fought}
    with \underline{us} upon Saint \underline{Crispin’s day}.

—Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV.iii

An example of perfect iambic pentameter. Note the feminine ending in l.1 (in iambic metre a feminine ending adds an extra syllable to the line), and how the stresses follow the sense of the lines.

Trochaic tetrameter:

    In what \underline{distant deeps} or \underline{skies}
    Burnt the \underline{fire} of thine \underline{eyes}? On
    what \underline{wings} dare \underline{he} \underline{aspire}?
    What \underline{the hand} dare \underline{seize} the \underline{fire}?

—Blake, “The Tyger”

The first two lines exhibit masculine endings, and thus are catalectic according to the regular pattern of trochaic metre; that is, they lack their final syllable. Arguably, the second foot in l.4 could be read as a
spondaic substitution (if dare is stressed). Spondaic substitution in iambic pentameter (l.3):

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows, Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave, And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

—Keats, “Ode on Melancholy”

Pyrrhic substitution in iambic tetrameter (l.2): The

woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep.
And miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep.

—Frost, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Dactylic dimeter:

Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die

—Tennyson, “The Charge of the Light Brigade”

Anapaestic metre:

There was an Old Lady of Chertsey,
Who made a remarkable curtsey; She twirled round and round,
Till she sunk underground,
Which distressed all the people of Chertsey.

—Edward Lear, “There Was an Old Lady of Chertsey”

As is common in limericks, this example includes multiple iambic substitutions, here in the initial syllables of lines 1-3.

Amphibrach:

And now comes an act of enormous enornance!
No former performer’s performed this performance!

—Dr. Seuss, If I Ran the Circus

Molossus:

Break, break, break.
On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!
And I would that my tongue could utter The thoughts that arise in me.

—Tennyson, “Break, Break, Break”

The first line is an example of a molossus; it is also an example of epizeuxis (see below).

**Stanzas**

When a poem is divided into sections, each section is known as a stanza. Stanzas usually share the same structure as the other stanzas within the poem.

- **Tercet**: a unit or stanza of three verse lines
- **Quatrain**: a unit or stanza of four verse lines
- **Quintain**: a stanza of five verse lines
- **Sestet**: a unit or stanza of six verse lines
- **Septet** or **heptastich**: a stanza of seven lines
- **Octave**: a unit or stanza of eight verse lines
- **Decastich**: a stanza or poem of ten lines

Note that many of these terms refer to a unit of this number of lines within a larger stanza or within a poem not divided into stanzas (e.g. a Shakespearean sonnet, which consists of three quatrains followed by a couplet).

- **Refrain**: a line or lines regularly repeated throughout a poem, traditionally at the end of each stanza. Very often found in ballads; it was also used to great effect by Yeats (see for example ‘The Withering of the Boughs’ or ‘The Black Tower’). Usually nowadays printed in italic to distinguish it from the main body of the poem.

- **Enjambment**: when the sense of a verse line runs over into the next line with no punctuated pause. The opposite is known as an **end-stopped** line. An example of enjambment in iambic pentameter:

  A dungeon horrible, on all sides round
  As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames No
  light, but rather darkness visible
  Served only to discover sights of woe

  —Milton, *Paradise Lost*, I

**Rhyme**

- **End rhyme**: rhyme occurring on stressed syllables at the ends of verse lines. The most common form of rhyme.
- **Couplet**: a pair of end-rhyming verse lines, usually of the same length. E.g.:

  Had we but World enough, and Time,
This coyness Lady were no crime.

We would sit down, and think which way To
walk, and pass our long Loves Day.

—Marvell, “To his Coy Mistress”

**Internal rhyme**: rhyme occurring within a single verse line.

**Crossed rhyme**: the rhyming of one word in the middle of a verse line with a word in the middle of the following line.

**Half rhyme**: also known as slant rhyme; an incomplete form of rhyme in which final consonants match but vowel sounds do not. E.g.:

> I have heard that hysterical women say They
> are sick of the palette and fiddle-bow. Of poets
> that are always gay,
>
> For everybody knows or else should know
>
> That if nothing drastic is done
>
> Aeroplane and Zeppelin will come out.
>
> Pitch like King Billy bomb-balls in Until
>
> the town lie beaten flat.
>
> —Yeats, “Lapis Lazuli”

The first quatrain is an example of full end rhyme; the second quatrain an example of half rhyme.

**Para-rhyme**: a form of half rhyme; when all the consonants of the relevant words match, not just the final consonants. E.g.:

> It seemed that out of battle I escaped
> Down some profound dull tunnel, long since scooped Through granites which titanic wars had groined.
> Yet also there encumbered sleepers groaned, Too fast in thought or death to be bestirred.
> Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
> Lifting distressful hands, as if to bless. And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall, – By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell.
—Wilfred Owen, “Strange Meeting”

**Eye rhyme:** a visual-only rhyme; i.e. when spellings match but in pronunciation there is no rhyme, e.g. want/pant, five/give.

**Double rhyme:** a rhyme on two syllables, the first stressed, the second unstressed. E.g.

I want a hero: —an uncommon want,

When every year and month sends forth a new one, Till, after
cloying the gazettes with can’t,

The age discovers he is not the true one

—Byron, *Don Juan*, I.i

The second and fourth lines are double rhymes; the first and third lines are examples of half rhyme/eye rhyme.

**Assonance:** the recurrence of similar vowel sounds in neighbouring words where the consonants do not match. E.g.:  

For the rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore—
Nameless here for evermore.

—Poe, “The Raven”

**Consonance:** the recurrence of similar consonants in neighbouring words where the vowel sounds do not match. The most commonly found forms of consonance, other than half rhyme and para-rhyme, are alliteration and sibilance.

Alliteration: the repetition of initial consonants in a sequence of neighbouring words. E.g.: Hear the

loud alarum bells—

**Brazen Bells!**

What a tale of terror, now, their turbulency tells!

—Poe, “The Bells”

**Sibilance:** the repetition of sibilants, i.e. consonants producing a hissing sound. E.g.: Ships that

pass in the night, and speak each other in passing;

Only a signal shown and a distant voice in the darkness

—Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn*

**Blank verse:** metrical verse that does not rhyme. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is an example; the majority of
Shakespeare is also in blank verse.

**Figurative, rhetorical, and structural devices**

**Metaphor:** when one thing is said to be another thing, or is described in terms normally connected to another thing, in order to suggest a quality shared by both. E.g.:

> Love, fame, ambition, avarice—’tis the same, Each
> idle, and all ill, and none the worst—For all are
> meteors with a different name,
> And Death the sable smoke where vanishes the flame.
> —Byron, *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*, IV

**Simile:** when one thing is directly compared with another thing; indicated by use of the words “as” or “like.” E.g.:

> I wandered lonely as a cloud
> —Wordsworth, “Daffodils”

**Metonymy:** when something is referred to by an aspect or attribute of it, or by something associated with it. E.g.:

> Now is the winter of our discontent
> Made glorious summer by this son of York . . .
> —Shakespeare, *Richard III*, I.i

Here “winter” and “summer” are examples of metaphor; “son of York” is an example of metonymy, being an attribute of Richard’s brother, Edward IV, here the person being referred to.

**Synecdoche:** a form of metonymy in which something is referred to by a specific part of its whole. “All hands on deck” is an example, in which the crew are being referred to by one specific part—their hands. E.g.:

> Take thy face hence.
> —Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.iii

**Personification** or prosopopoeia: when inanimate objects, animals or ideas are referred to as if they were human. Similar terms are anthropomorphism, when human form is ascribed to something not human, e.g., a deity; and the pathetic fallacy, when natural phenomena are described as if they could feel as humans do. Shelley’s ‘Invocation to Misery’ is an example.

**Onomatopoeia:** a word that imitates the sound to which it refers. E.g. “clang,” “crackle,” “bang,” etc.
Synaesthesia: the application of terms relating to one sense to a different one, e.g., “a warm sound.” For example:

Odours there are . . . green as meadow grass

—Baudelaire, “Correspondences”

Oxymoron: the combination of two contradictory terms. E.g.: Feather of lead, bright smoke, cold fire, sick health,

Still-waking sleep that is not what it is!

—Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, I.i

Hendiadys: when a single idea is expressed by two nouns, used in conjunction. E.g. “house and home” or Hamlet’s “Angels and ministers of grace” (Hamlet, I.v).

Anaphora: the repetition of the same word or group of words at the beginnings of successive lines or clauses. E.g.:

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime, Said

then the lost archangel, this the seat That we must change for heaven . . .

—Milton, Paradise Lost, I

Epistrophe: the repetition of the same word or group of words at the ends of successive lines or clauses. E.g.:

I know thee, I have found thee, & I will not let thee go

—Blake, “America—a Prophecy”

Epizeuxis: the repetition of a word with no intervening words. E.g., Tennyson’s “Break, break, break,” quoted above.

Polysyndeton: use of more than the required amount of conjunctions. E.g.: Havoc and spoil and ruin are my gain.

—Milton, Paradise Lost, II

The opposite of asyndeton, which refers to the deliberate omission of conjunctions.

Anachronism: when an object, custom or idea is misplaced outside of its proper historical time. A famous example is the clock in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar.

Apostrophe: an address to an inanimate object, abstraction, or a dead or absent person. E.g.:
Busie old foole, unruly Sunne,
Why dost thou thus,
Through windowes, and through curtaines call on us?
—Donne, “The Sunne Rising”

**Hyperbole**: extreme exaggeration, not intended literally. E.g.: Since

Hero’s time hath half the world been black.

—Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*

**Adynaton**: a form of hyperbole—a figure of speech that stresses the inexpressibility of something, usually by stating that words cannot describe it. H. P. Lovecraft’s short story “The Unnamable” is essentially a riff on this figure of speech, satirizing Lovecraft’s own regular use of it in his work.

**Meiosis**: an intentional understatement in which something is described as less significant than it really is. A well-known example is found in *Romeo and Juliet* when Mercutio describes his death-wound as ‘a scratch’ (III.iii).

**Litotes**: a form of meiosis; the affirmation of something by the denial of its opposite, e.g. “not uncommon,” “not bad.”

**Erotesis (rhetorical question)**: asking a question without requiring an answer, in order to assert or deny a statement. E.g.:

What though the field be lost? All is not lost . . .

—*Paradise Lost*, I

**In medias res**: the technique of beginning a narrative in the middle of the action, before relating preceding events at a later point. *Paradise Lost* is an example (following the convention of epic poetry).

**Leitmotif**: a phrase, image or situation frequently repeated throughout a work, supporting a central theme. An example is the personification of the mine shaft lift as a devouring creature in Zola’s *Germinal*, repeated throughout the novel. Remember! Simply being able to identify the devices and knowing the terms is not enough. They are only a means to an end. You must always consider: why they are being used, what effect they have, and how they affect meaning(s).

**Further reading**


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Approaching Poetry (Includes Free Verse)

Introduction

This reading is designed to develop the analytical skills you need for a more in-depth study of literary texts. You will learn about rhythm, alliteration, rhyme, poetic inversion, voice and line lengths and endings. You will examine poems that do not rhyme and learn how to compare and contrast poetry.

By the end of this reading you should be able to:

- have an awareness of the role of analysis to inform appreciation and understanding of poetry; be able to
- identify and discuss the main analytical concepts used in analyzing poetry.

What is the point of analyzing poetry? One simple answer is that the more we know about anything the more interesting it becomes: listening to music or looking at paintings with someone who can tell us a little about what we hear or see – or what we’re reading – is one way of increasing our understanding and pleasure. That may mean learning something about the people who produced the writing, music, painting that we are interested in, and why they produced it.

But it may also mean understanding why one particular form was chosen rather than another: why, for example, did the poet choose to write a sonnet rather than an ode, a ballad, or a villanelle? To appreciate the appropriateness of one form, we need to be aware of a range of options available to that particular writer at that particular time. In the same way, we also need to pay attention to word choice. Why was this particular word chosen from a whole range of words that might have said much the same? Looking at manuscript drafts can be really enlightening, showing how much effort was expended in order to find the most appropriate or most evocative expression.

Activity 1

Click on William Blake’s “Tyger” to read and compare the two versions of the poem. The one on the left is a draft; the other is the final published version.
Discussion

The most obvious difference between the two is that stanza 4 of the draft does not survive in the published version, and an entirely new stanza, “When the stars threw down their spears,” appears in the finished poem. Significantly, this introduces the idea of “the Lamb,” a dramatic contrast to the tiger, as well as the idea of a “he” who made the lamb. One similarity between the draft and final version is that each is made up entirely of unanswered questions. But if you look at the manuscript stanza 5, you can see revisions from “What” to “Where,” and the struggle with the third line, where Blake eventually decided that the idea of an arm was redundant, subsumed in the notions of grasping and clasping. The two rhyme words are decided—grasp/clasp—but in which order should they come? “Clasp” is a less aggressive word than “grasp”; clasp is not quite as gentle as an embrace, but it is closer to embracing than grasp is—so it must be for deliberate effect that we end up with “What dread grasp/Dare its deadly terrors clasp?”

Look at one more example. Think about this first stanza of Thomas Hardy’s “Neutral Tones” (1867): We stood by a pond that winter day,

And the sun was white, as though chidden of God, And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;

—They had fallen from an ash, and were gray. (Gibson, 1976, p. 12)

Notice that, in the last line, oak or elm would work just as well as far as the rhythm or music of the line is concerned, but ash has extra connotations of grayness, of something burnt out, dead, finished (“ashes to ashes”), all of which contribute to the mood that Hardy conveys in a way that ‘oak’ or ‘elm’ wouldn’t.

To return to the original question then, what is the point of analyzing poetry?, one answer is that only an analytical approach can help us arrive at an informed appreciation and understanding of the poem. Whether we like a poem or not, we should be able to recognize the craftsmanship that has gone into making it, the ways in which stylistic techniques and devices have worked to create meaning.

General readers may be entirely happy to find a poem pleasing, or unsatisfactory, without stopping to ask why. But studying poetry is a different matter and requires some background understanding of what those stylistic techniques might be, as well as an awareness of constraints and conventions within which poets have written throughout different periods of history.

You may write poetry yourself. If so, you probably know only too well how difficult it is to produce something you feel really expresses what you want to convey. Writing an essay presents enough problems—a poem is a different matter, but certainly no easier. Thinking of poetry as a discipline and a craft which, to some extent, can be learned, is another useful way of approaching analysis. After all, how successful are emotional outpourings on paper? Words one might scribble down in the heat of an intense moment may have some validity in conveying that intensity, but in general might they not be more satisfactory if they were later revised? A remark Wordsworth made 200 years ago has become responsible for a number of misconceptions about what poetry should do. In the Preface to a volume of poems called Lyrical Ballads (1802), he wrote that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (Owens and Johnson, 1998, p.85,11.105–6). The second time he uses the same phrase he says something often forgotten today: “poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it
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takes its origin from emotion *recollected in tranquillity*” (editor’s italics) (ibid., p. 95, ll.557–8). Notice the significant time lapse implied there—the idea that, however powerful or spontaneous the emotion, it needs to be carefully considered before you start writing. He goes on:

The emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation is gradually reproduced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins.

You don’t have to agree with Wordsworth about what poetry is or how best to achieve it. But the idea of contemplation is a useful and important one: it implies distance, perhaps detachment, but above all re-creation, not the thing itself. And if we try to re-create something, we must choose our methods and our words carefully in order to convey what we experienced as closely as possible. A word of warning though: writers do not always aim to express personal experiences; often a persona is created.

The poet Ezra Pound offered this advice to other poets in an essay written in 1913:

“Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something” (Gray, 1990, p. 56).

And in the 1950s William Carlos Williams advised, “cut and cut again whatever you write.” In his opinion, the “test of the artist is to be able to revise without showing a seam” (loc. cit.). That sewing image stresses the notion of skilled craftsmanship. Pound and Williams were American, writing long after Wordsworth, but, as you can see, like countless other poets they too reflected very seriously on their own poetic practice.

**Note About Organization**

In what follows, section headings like Rhyme, Rhythm, Line lengths and line endings, Alliteration, and so on, are intended to act as signposts to help you (if terms are unfamiliar, look them up in the glossary at the end). But these headings indicate only the main technique being discussed. While it is something we need to attempt, it is very difficult to try to isolate devices in this way—to separate out, for example, the effects of rhythm from rhyme. This doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t look for particular techniques at work in a poem, but we need to be aware that they will be interdependent and the end product effective or not because of the way such elements work together.

As you work through this reading, don’t be discouraged if your response to exercises differs from the example. On a daily basis, you probably read much less poetry than you do prose. This is perhaps one reason why many people say they find poetry difficult—unfamiliarity and lack of practice. But, like anything else, the more effort put in, the wider the range of experiences you have to draw on.

When you come across an unfamiliar extract in the discussions that follow you might decide to look up the whole poem on your own account, widening your own experience and enjoying it too.

Remember that language changes over the years. The text will discuss poems from different periods and given dates of first publication. Do keep this in mind, especially as you may find some examples easier to understand than others. The idiom and register of a poem written in the eighteenth century will usually be quite different from one written in the twentieth. Different verse forms are popular at different times; while sonnets have been written for centuries, they were especially fashionable in Elizabethan times, for example. Don’t expect to find free verse written much before the twentieth
century.

If you are working on a poem, it can be a good idea to print it, maybe even enlarge it, and then write anything you find particularly striking in the margins. Use highlighters or colored pens to underline repetitions and link rhyme words. Patterns may well emerge that will help you understand the way the poem develops. Make the poems your own in this way, and then, if you are the kind of person who doesn’t mind writing in books, you can insert notes in a more restrained way in the margins of your book.

If you prefer to work on your computer, you can do a similar thing by using an annotation tool on your word processor. Whatever you do, always ask yourself what the effect of a particular technique that you identify is. Noticing an unusual choice of words, a particular rhyme scheme or use of alliteration is an important first step, but you need to take another one. Unless you go on to say why what you have noticed is effective, what it contributes to the rest of the poem, how it endorses or changes things, then you are doing less than half the job. Get into the habit of asking yourself questions, even if you can’t always answer them satisfactorily.

Rhythm

All speech has rhythm because we naturally stress some words or syllables more than others. The rhythm can sometimes be very regular and pronounced, as in a children’s nursery rhyme – ‘JACK and JILL went UP the HILL’ – but even in the most ordinary sentence the important words are given more stress. In poetry, rhythm is extremely important: patterns are deliberately created and repeated for varying effects.

The rhythmical pattern of a poem is called its meter, and we can analyze, or scan lines of poetry to identify stressed and unstressed syllables. In marking the text to show this, the mark ‘/’ is used to indicate a stressed syllable, and ‘x’ to indicate an unstressed syllable. Each complete unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a foot, which usually has one stressed and one or two unstressed syllables.

```
  x  /
  ‘forgot’.
```

The most common foot in English is known as the iamb, which is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (x/). Many words in English are iambic: a simple example is the word forgot. When we say this, the stresses naturally fall in the sequence:
Iambic rhythm is in fact the basic sound pattern in ordinary English speech. If you say the following line aloud you will hear what I mean:

\[
\text{x / x / x / x / x / x / x / x /}
\]

I went across the road and bought a pair of shoes.

The next most common foot is the *trochee*, a stressed syllable (or beat) followed by an unstressed one (*/x*), as in the word

\[
/ \text{x}
\]

‘mountain’.

Both the iamb and the trochee have two syllables, the iamb being a ‘rising’ rhythm and the trochee a ‘falling’ rhythm. Another two-syllable foot known as the *spondee* has two equally stressed beats (*//*), as in

\[
/ / 
\]

‘blue spurt’.

Other important feet have three syllables. The most common are the *anapest* (*x x /*) and the *dactyl* (*/ x x*), which are triple rhythms, rising and falling respectively, as in the words

\[
\text{x x /} / \text{x x}
\]

‘unimpressed’ and ‘probably’.

Here are some fairly regular examples of the four main kinds of meter used in poetry. (I have separated the feet by using a vertical slash.) You should say the lines aloud, listening for the stress patterns and noting how the beats fall on particular syllables or words.

**Iambic meter**

\[
\text{x / x / x / x / x / x / x /}
\]

The current tolls the knell of parting day

**Trochaic meter**

\[
/ \text{x} / \text{x} / \text{x} / 
\]

Tiger tiger burning bright

**Anapestic meter**

\[
\text{x x / x x / x x / x x / x x /}
\]

She is far from the land where her young hero sleeps

**Dactylic meter**

\[
/ \text{x x} / \text{x x} / \text{x x} / \text{x x} / \text{x x} / 
\]

Woman much missed how you call to me, call to me

The other technical point that you need to know about is the way the lengths of lines of verse are described. This is done according to the number of feet they contain, and the names given to different lengths of lines are as follows:

- monometer a line of one foot
dimeter a line of two feet
trimeter a line of three feet
tetrameter a line of four feet
pentameter a line of five feet
hexameter a line of six feet
heptameter a line of seven feet
octameter a line of eight feet.

By far the most widely used of these are the **tetrameter** and the **pentameter**. If you look back at the four lines of poetry given as examples above, you can count the feet. You will see that the first one has five feet, so it is an iambic pentameter line; the second one has four feet, so it is a trochaic tetrameter line; the fourth and fifth also have four feet, so are anapestic and dactylic tetrameter lines respectively. Lines do not always have exactly the ‘right’ number of beats. Sometimes a pentameter line will have an extra beat, as in the famous line from *Hamlet*, “To be or not to be: that is the question,” where the “tion” of question is an eleventh, unstressed beat. (It is worth asking yourself why Shakespeare wrote the line like this. Why did he not write what would have been a perfectly regular ten-syllable line, such as “The question is, to be or not to be”?)

Having outlined some of the basic meters of English poetry, it is important to say at once that very few poems would ever conform to a perfectly regular metrical pattern. The effect of that would be very boring indeed: imagine being restricted to using only iambic words, or trying to keep up a regular trochaic rhythm. Poets therefore often include trochaic or anapestic or dactylic words or phrases within what are basically iambic lines, in order to make them more interesting and suggestive, and to retain normal pronunciation. Here is a brief example from Shakespeare to show you what this mean. These lines were spoken by Rosalind in *As You Like It*, Act 1, scene 2. This first version has been marked to show you the basic iambic meter.

```
My fa- ther loved | Sir Row- land as | his soul.

And all | the world | was of | my fa- ther’s mind.
```

If you say the lines out loud in this regular way you can hear that the effect is very unnatural. Here is one way the lines might be scanned to show how the stresses would fall in speech (though there are other ways of scanning them):

```
My father loved Sir Rowland as his soul,
And all the world was of my father’s mind.
```

It must be emphasized that there is no need to feel that you must try to remember all the technical terms in poetry. The purpose has been to help you to become aware of the importance of rhythmic effects in poetry, and it can be just as effective to try to describe these in your own words.

The thing to hang on to when writing about the rhythm of a poem is that, as Ezra Pound put it, “Rhythm MUST have meaning. It can’t be merely a careless dash off with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tumty tum tumpty tum tum ta” (quoted in Gray, 1990, p. 56). There are occasions, of course, when a tum-ty-ty-tum rhythm may be appropriate and have meaning. When Tennyson wrote
“The Charge of the Light Brigade,” he recreated the sound, pace, and movement of horses thundering along with the emphatic dactyls of “Half a league, half a league, half a league onward / Into the valley of death rode the six hundred.” For a very different example, look at a short two-line poem by Pound himself. This time there is no fixed meter: like much twentieth century poetry, this poem is in free verse. Its title is “In a Station of the Metro” (the Metro being the Paris underground railway). It was written in 1916:

```
X x X x X x /
/ X X /
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
/ X x X x / / /
Petals on a wet, black bough.
```

Here you can see that the rhythm plays a subtle part in conveying the meaning. The poem is comparing the faces of people in a crowded underground to petals that have fallen on to a wet bough. The rhythm not only highlights the key words in each line, but produces much of the emotional feeling of the poem by slowing down the middle words of the first line and the final three words of the second.

For our final example of rhythm, here is a passage from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism* (1711).

**Activity 2**

Take a look at this excerpt from *An Essay on Criticism*. Read it aloud if you can. Listen to the rhythm, and identify why the rhythm is appropriate to the meaning.

**Discussion**

Pope here uses a basic structure of iambic pentameters with variations, so that the lines sound as if they have a different pace, faster or slower, depending on what is being described. It is not just rhythm that contributes to the effect here: rhyme and alliteration (successive words beginning with the same sound) recreate smooth, rough, slow and swift movement. Rhythm is entirely dependent on word choice, but is also influenced by other interdependent stylistic devices. Pope’s lines enact what they describe simply because of the care that has gone into choosing the right words. It doesn’t matter if you don’t recognise the classical allusions: from the descriptions it is clear that Ajax is a strong man and Camilla is quick and light. If you count the beats of each line, you’ll notice that, in spite of the variety of sound and effect, all have five stresses, except the last, which has six. Strangely enough it is the last and longest line that creates an impression of speed. How is this achieved? Try to hear the lines by reading them again out loud.

There is really only one way, and that is through the words chosen to represent movement: the repeated ‘s’ sounds associated with Camilla trip swiftly off the tip of the tongue, whereas Ajax’s lines demand real physical effort from mouth, lips, and tongue. You will get a much stronger sense of this if you form the words in this way, even if you are unable to say them out loud. In an exam, for instance, silent articulation of a poem will help you grasp many poetic techniques and effects that may otherwise be missed.

This extract from Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*, like the whole poem, is written in rhyming couplets (lines rhyming in pairs). They confer a formal, regular quality to the verse. The punctuation helps to control the way in which we read: notice that there is a pause at the end of each line, either a comma, a
semi-colon, or a full stop. This use of the end-stopped line is characteristic of eighteenth-century heroic couplets (iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs), where the aim was to reproduce classical qualities of balance, harmony, and proportion.

Get into the habit of looking at rhyme words. Are any of Pope’s rhymes particularly interesting here? One thing I noticed was what is known as poetic inversion. The rhyme shore/roar is clearly important to the sound sense of the verse, but the more natural word order (were this ordinary speech) would be “The hoarse rough verse should roar like the torrent.” Had he written this, Pope would have lost the sound qualities of the rhyme shore/roar. He would have had to find a word such as “abhorrent” to rhyme with “torrent,” and the couplet would have had a very different meaning. He would also have lost the rhythm of the line, in spite of the fact that the words are exactly the same.

Before we leave An Essay on Criticism, did you notice that Pope’s subject in this poem is really poetry itself? Like Wordsworth, Pound, and William Carlos Williams, all of whom were quoted earlier, Pope too was concerned with poetry as a craft.

Alliteration

Alliteration is the term used to describe successive words beginning with the same sound—usually with the same letter.

To illustrate this, consider a stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough’s poem, “Natura naturans.” There is not enough space to quote the whole poem, but to give you some idea of the context of this stanza so that you can more fully appreciate what Clough is doing, it is worth explaining that “Natura naturans” describes the sexual tension between a young man and woman who sit next to each other in a railway carriage. They have not been introduced, and they neither speak nor exchange so much as a glance.

The subject matter and its treatment is unusual and also extraordinarily frank for the time of writing (about 1849), but you need to know what is being described in order to appreciate the physicality of the lines quoted.

Activity 3

Read the attached stanza from Arthur Hugh Clough’s poem “Natura Naturans” and consider the following questions:

1. What is the single most striking technique used, and what are the effects?
2. How would you describe the imagery, and what does it contribute to the overall effect?
Survey of Native American Literature

Discussion

1. Visually the use of alliteration is striking, particularly in the first line and almost equally so in the second. If you took the advice above about paying attention to the physical business of articulating the words too, you should be in a good position to discriminate between the rapidity of the flies and the heavier movement of the bees, and to notice how tactile the language is. The effect is actually to create sensuality in the stanza.

2. Notice that though we begin with flies, bees and rooks, all of which are fairly common flying creatures, we move to the more romantic lark with its “wild” song and then to the positively exotic gazelle, leopard, and dolphin. From the rather homely English air (flies, bees, birds), we move to foreign locations “Libyan dell” and “Indian glade,” and from there to “tropic seas.” (Cod in the North Sea would have very different connotations from dolphins in the tropics.) Air, earth, and sea are all invoked to help express the variety of changing highly charged erotic feelings that the speaker remembers. The images are playful and preposterous, joyfully expressing the familiar poetic subject of sexual attraction and arousal in a way that makes it strange and new. Notice that in each case the image is more effective because the alliteration emphasizes it.

Rhyme

If a poem rhymes, then considering how the rhyme works is always important.

Rhyme schemes can be simple or highly intricate and complex; it will always be worth considering why a particular rhyme pattern was chosen and trying to assess its effects.

Activity 4

Read “Love from the North” (1862) by Christina Rossetti. What is the poem about, and how does the rhyme contribute to the meaning and overall effect?

Discussion

‘Love From the North’ tells a simple story. A woman about to marry one man is whisked away by another, just as she is about to exchange vows. The form of the poem is very simple: the second and fourth lines of each of the eight 4-line stanzas rhyme. More significantly, because the last word of each stanza is “nay,” there is only one rhyme sound throughout. There are more internal rhymes relying on the same repeated sound, however, aren’t there? Look at the use of “nay” and “say” in the last lines of stanzas 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8. In the second stanza, “gay” occurs twice in line 2; stanza five and six both have “yea” in line 3. What is the effect of this?

Do you think the effect might be to help over-simplify the story? Clearly the woman has doubts about the man from the south’s devotion: he “never dared” to say no to her. He seems to have no will of his own: he “saddens” when she does, is “gay” when she is, wants only what she does. On her wedding day she thinks: “It’s quite too late to think of nay.” But is she any happier with the strong man from the north? Who is he? Has he carried her off against her will? And what exactly do you make of the last stanza? Do the “links of love” imply a chain? This strong-minded woman who imposed her will on the man from the south has “neither heart nor power/Nor will nor wish” to say no to the man from the north. Is that good, or bad? And what do you make of the ‘book and bell’ with which she’s made to stay?
Certainly they imply something different from the conventional Christian marriage she was about to embark on in the middle of the poem – witchcraft, perhaps, or magic? And are the words “Till now” particularly significant at the beginning of line 3 in the last stanza? Might they suggest a new resolve to break free?

How important is it to resolve such questions? It is very useful to ask them, but not at all easy to find answers. In fact, that is one of the reasons I like the poem so much. The language is very simple and so is the form – eight quatrains (or four-line stanzas) – and yet the more I think about the poem, the more interesting and ambiguous it seems. In my opinion, that is its strength. After all, do we always know exactly what we want or how we feel about relationships? Even if we do, is it always possible to put such feelings into words? Aren’t feelings often ambivalent rather than straightforward?

It is also worth bearing in mind the fact that the poem is written in ballad form. A ballad tells a story, but it does only recount events – part of the convention is that ballads don’t go into psychological complexities. It is likely that Rossetti chose this ancient oral verse form because she was interested in raising ambiguities. But perhaps the point of the word “nay” chiming throughout “Love From the North” is to indicate the female speaker saying no to both men – the compliant lover and his opposite, the demon lover, alike?

Keats’s ‘Eve of St Agnes’ (1820) also tells a tale of lovers, but it isn’t a ballad, even though the rhyme scheme of the first four lines is the same as Rossetti’s quatrains. The stanzas are longer, and the form more complex and sophisticated. The rhyme pattern is the same throughout all 42 stanzas, the first two of which are reproduced for the following activity:

**Activity 5**

Read the first two stanzas of Keats’s “Eve of St Agnes.” How would you describe the rhyme scheme, and does it seem appropriate for the subject matter?

**Discussion**

In comparison to the Rossetti poem the rhyme sounds form complex patterns because “was”/”grass” in the first stanza and “man”/”wan” in the second do not quite produce a full rhyme (depending on your accent of them). The first and third lines do rhyme in subsequent stanzas. Using a letter of the alphabet to describe each new rhyme sound, we could describe the pattern like this: a b a b c b c c (imagine sustaining that intricate patterning for 42 stanzas). This kind of formula is useful up to a point for showing how often the same sounds recur, and it does show how complicated the interweaving of echoing sounds is. But it says nothing about how the sounds relate to what is being said – and it is the relationship between meaning and word choice that is of particular interest.

**Activity 6**

Read the extract from Tennyson’s “Mariana” (1830). Again, this comes from a longer poem, so it would be useful to look it up and read the rest if you have the opportunity.

Read the extract and consider the following questions:
1. Describe the rhyme in the stanza from Tennyson’s ‘Mariana’.
2. What is the first stanza about?

**Discussion**

1. As with the Keats poem, the rhyme scheme here is quite complicated. Using the same diagrammatic formula of a letter for each new rhyme sound, we could describe this as “a b a b c d e c f e f.” You might notice, too, that indentations at the beginning of each line emphasize lines that rhyme with each other: usually the indentations are alternate, except for lines 6 and 7, which form a couplet in the middle of the stanza. It is worth telling you too that each of the stanzas ends with a variation of the line “I would that I were dead” (this is known as a refrain) so – as in Christina Rossetti’s “Love From the North” – a dominant sound or series of sounds throughout helps to control the mood of the poem.

2. We may not know who Mariana is, or why she is in the lonely, crumbling grange, but she is obviously waiting for a man who is slow in arriving. As with the stanzas from Keats’s “Eve of St Agnes,” there is plenty of carefully observed detail – black moss on the flower-plots, rusty nails, a clinking latch on a gate or door – all of which description contributes to the desolation of the scene and Mariana’s mood. Were the moated grange a lively, sociable household, the poem would be very different. Either Mariana would be cheerful, or her suicidal misery would be in sharp contrast to her surroundings. It is always worth considering what settings contribute to the overall mood of a poem.

**Poetic Inversion**

Poetic inversion, or changing the usual word order of speech, is often linked to the need to maintain a rhythm or to find a rhyme. We noticed Pope’s poetic inversion in *An Essay on Criticism* and saw how the rhyme was intimately linked to the rhythm of the verse. The song “Dancing in the Street,” first recorded by Martha and the Vandellas in the 1960s, does violence to word order in the interests of rhyme – “There’ll be dancing in the street/ A chance new folk to meet” – but, because the words are sung to a driving rhythm, we are unlikely to notice how awkward they are. There’s a convention that we recognize, however unconsciously, that prevents us from mentally re-writing the line as “a chance to meet new people.” (“People” rather than “folk” would be more usual usage for many, but, as with the Pope example, this would mean that the rhythm too would be lost.)

**Poems That Don’t Rhyme**

Are poems that don’t rhyme prose? Not necessarily. Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), a novelist rather than a poet, and T.S. Eliot (1888–1965), known particularly for his poetry, both wrote descriptive pieces best described as ‘prose poems’. These look like short prose passages since there is no attention to line lengths or layout on the page, as there was, for example, in ‘Mariana’. When you study Shakespeare you will come across blank verse. “Blank” here means “not rhyming,” but the term “blank verse” is used specifically to describe verse in non-rhyming iambic pentameters.

Although iambic pentameters resemble normal speech patterns, in ordinary life we speak in prose. You’ll notice if you look through Shakespeare’s plays that blank verse is reserved for kings, nobles, heroes and heroines. They may *also* speak in prose, as lesser characters do, but commoners don’t ever have speeches in blank verse. Shakespeare – and other playwrights like him – used the form to indicate
status. It is important to recognise this convention, which would have been understood by his contemporaries – writers, readers, and audiences alike. So choosing to write a poem in blank verse is an important decision: it will elevate the subject. One such example is Milton’s epic *Paradise Lost* (1667), a long poem in twelve Books describing Creation, Adam and Eve’s temptation, disobedience and expulsion from Paradise. It sets out to justify the ways of God to man, so blank verse is entirely appropriate. This great epic was in Wordsworth’s mind when he chose the same form for his autobiographical poem, *The Prelude*.

**Activity 7**

Read and compare these extracts. One is from Book XIII of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth is walking up Mount Snowdon; the other is from “The Idiot Boy,” one of his *Lyrical Ballads*. What effects are achieved by the different forms?

**Discussion**

Both poems use iambic meter – an unstressed followed by a stressed syllable. The extract from *The Prelude* uses iambic pentameters, five metrical feet in each line, whereas “The Idiot Boy” (like the ballad, “Love From the North”) is in tetrameters, only four, establishing a more sing-song rhythm. Other stylistic techniques contribute to the difference in tone too: the language of *The Prelude* is formal (Wordsworth’s “Ascending” rather than “going up”), whereas “The Idiot Boy” uses deliberately homely diction and rhyme. Three simple rhyme words ring out throughout the 92 stanzas of the latter: “Foy,” “boy” and “joy” stand at the heart of the poem, expressing the mother’s pride in her son. The moon features in each extract. In *The Prelude*, as Wordsworth climbs, the ground lightens, as it does in The Old Testament before a prophet appears. Far from being a meaningless syllable to fill the rhythm of a line, ‘lo’ heightens the religious parallel, recalling the biblical ‘Lo, I bring you tidings of great joy’: this episode from *The Prelude* describes a moment of spiritual illumination. Wordsworth’s intentions in these two poems were quite different, and the techniques reflect that.

**Voice**

Is the speaker in a poem one and the same as the writer? Stop and consider this for a few moments. Can you think of any poems you have read where a writer has created a character, or persona, whose voice we hear when we read?

Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* was written as an autobiographical poem, but there are many instances
where it is obvious that poet and persona are different. Charlotte Mew’s poem, ‘The Farmer’s Bride’ (1916) begins like this:

Three summers since I chose a maid,
Too young maybe – but more’s to do
At harvest-time than bide and woo.
When us was wed she turned afraid Of
love and me and all things human;

(Warner, 1981, pp. 1–2)

Mew invents a male character here, and clearly separates herself as a writer from the voice in her poem. Some of the most well-known created characters – or personae – in poetry are Browning’s dramatic monologues.

Activity 8

Consider the opening lines from three Robert Browning poems. Who do you think is speaking?

Discussion

Well, the first speaker isn’t named, but we can infer that, like Brother Lawrence whom he hates, he’s a monk. The second must be a Duke since he refers to his “last Duchess” and, if we read to the end of the third poem, we discover that the speaker is a man consumed with such jealousy that he strangles his beloved Porphyria with her own hair. Each of the poems is written in the first person (“my heart’s abhorrence”; “That’s my last Duchess”; “I listened with heart fit to break”). None of the characters Browning created in these poems bears any resemblance to him: the whole point of a dramatic monologue is the creation of a character who is most definitely not the poet. Charlotte Mew’s poem can be described in the same way.

Line Lengths and Line Endings

Read the following prose extract taken from Walter Pater’s discussion of the Mona Lisa, written in 1893, and then complete the activity (again, check your schedule to see if this is assigned):

She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants: and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Activity 9

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935 (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his
version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no regular rhythm either, though you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

**Discussion**

Of course, there is no right answer to this exercise, but you should compare your version to Yeats’s, printed below, to see if you made similar decisions.

_She is older than the rocks among which she sits;_
_Like the Vampire,
_She has been dead many times,
And learned the secrets of the grave;_
_And has been a diver in deep seas,
And keeps their fallen day about her;
And trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants;_
_And, as Leda,
_Was the mother of Helen of Troy,
And, as St Anne,
_Was the mother of Mary;_
And all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes,
And lives
Only in the delicacy
With which it has moulded the changing lineaments, And
tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Did you use upper case letters for the first word of each line, as Yeats did? You may have changed the punctuation, or perhaps have left it out altogether. Like Yeats, you may have used “And” at the beginnings of lines to draw attention to the repetitions: nine of the lines begin in this way, emphasizing the way the clauses pile up, defining and redefining the mysterious Mona Lisa.

Two lines begin with “She”: while there was no choice about the first, beginning the third in the same way focuses attention on her right at the start of the poem. Yeats has used Pater’s punctuation to guide his line endings in all but two places: lines 13 and 14 run on – a stylistic device known as enjambment. The effect is an interesting interaction between eyes and ears. While you may be tempted to read on without pausing to find the sense, the line endings and white space of the page impose pauses, less than the commas and semi-colons that mark off the other lines, but significant nevertheless.

Yeats’s arrangement of the words makes the structure and movement of Pater’s long sentence clearer than it appears when written as prose. The poem begins with age – she is “older than the rocks” – and refers to “Vampire,” “death,” and “grave” in the first lines. The decision to single out the two words “And lives” in a line by themselves towards the end of the poem sets them in direct opposition to the opening; we have moved from great age and living death to life. The arrangement of lines 8–11 highlights her links with both pagan and Christian religions: the Mona Lisa was the mother of Helen of Troy and the Virgin Mary. The wisdom and knowledge she has acquired is worn lightly, nothing more
than “the sound of lyres and flutes,” apparent only in the “delicacy” of color on “eyelids and hands.”

The aim of the preceding exercise was to encourage you to think about form and structure even when a poem does not appear to follow a conventional pattern. Because you have now ‘written’ a poem and had the opportunity to compare it with someone else’s version of the same words, you should begin to realize the importance of decisions about where exactly to place a word for maximum effect, and how patterns can emerge, which will control our reading when, for example, successive lines begin with repetitions. It should have made you think about the importance of the beginnings of lines, as well as line endings.

Earlier, discussing the extract from Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*, you were asked to concentrate on the sound qualities of the poetry. Here, you are to consider the visual impact of the poem on the page. It is a good thing to be aware of what a complex task reading is, and to be alive to the visual as well as the aural qualities of the verse.

**Activity 10**

When W.B. Yeats was asked to edit *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892–1935* (1936), he chose to begin with this passage from Pater, but he set it out quite differently on the page. Before you read his version, write out the extract as a poem yourself. The exercise is designed to make you think about line lengths, where to start a new line and where to end it when there is no rhyme to give you a clue. There is no regular rhythm either, though I’m sure you will discover rhythms in the words, as well as repeated patterns. How can you best bring out these poetic features?

Further exercise: taking Grace Nichols’s “Wherever I Hang,” discussed in **Activity 10**, you could reverse the process carried out in the previous exercise by writing out the poem as prose. Then, covering up the original, you could rewrite it as verse and compare your version with the original.

**Comparing and Contrasting**

Often you will find that an assignment asks you to “compare and contrast” poems. There’s a very good reason for this, for often it is only by considering different treatments of similar subjects that we become aware of a range of possibilities, and begin to understand why particular choices have been made. You will have realized that often in the previous discussions we have looked at poems that were more simple before moving to one with more intricate patterning. Anne Brontë’s “Home” and Grace Nichols’s “Wherever I Hang” treat the subject of exile in quite different ways, and looking at one can sharpen understanding of what the other does.

**Activity 11**

Read the opening lines from these two poems commemorating deaths. What can you explain why they sound so very different?
Discussion

The first begins more elaborately and with a more formal tone than the second. “Felix Randal” tends to use language in an unusual way, but you would probably agree that the first sentence is quite straightforward and sounds colloquial (or informal), as if the speaker has just overheard someone talking about Randal’s death and wants to confirm his impression. “Lycidas” opens quite differently. It is not immediately apparent what evergreens have to do with anything (in fact they work to establish an appropriately melancholy atmosphere or tone), and it isn’t until line 8 that we learn of a death. The word “dead” is repeated, and the following line tells us that Lycidas was a young man. While “Felix Randal” has an immediacy, the speaker of “Lycidas” seems to find it hard to get going.

Both poems are elegies – poems written to commemorate death – and both poets are aware of writing within this convention, although they treat it differently.

Activity 12

What do the titles of the poems used in Activity 13 tell us about each poem, and how might they help us understand the different uses of the elegiac convention?

Discussion

It would be apparent to most readers that “Felix Randall” is simply a man’s name, while “Lycidas” is more mysterious. In fact, Lycidas is a traditional pastoral name, but unless you know something about the classical pastoral tradition it might mean very little to you. The young man whose death Milton was commemorating was actually called Edward King, but, at the time he was writing, elegies were formal, public and impersonal poems rather than private expressions of grief. “Lycidas” commemorates a member of a prominent family rather than a close friend of the poet’s. Over two hundred years later, Hopkins, while working loosely within the same elegiac convention, adapts it. Felix Randal is an ordinary working man, not a public figure. In the seventeenth century it would have been unlikely that he would have been considered worthy of a poem like this.

If you were making a special study of elegies, there would be a great deal more to say. That’s not the
idea here, though. The point is that by comparing and contrasting the tone of the opening lines and the titles, and considering when the poems were written, we have come up with a number of significant differences.

Activity 13

Read this poem by Robert Browning carefully. Who is speaking, and who is being addressed?

Discussion

From the evidence of the poem we know that the speaker once walked across a moor, found an eagle’s feather, and has a high regard for the poet Shelley (1792–1822). The person being addressed is not named, but we discover that he (or she) once met Shelley, and this alone confers status by association. The word “you” (“your” in one instance) is repeated in 6 out of the first 8 lines. “You” becomes a rhyme word at the end of the second line, so when we reach the word “new” in line four – one of the two lines in the first stanzas that doesn’t contain “you” – the echo supplies the deficiency. “You” clearly represents an important focus in the first half of the poem, but who exactly is “you”?

Thinking about this apparently straightforward question of who is being addressed takes us into an important area of critical debate: for each one of us who has just read the poem has, in one sense, become a person who not only knows who Shelley is (which may not necessarily be the case) but lived when he did, met him, listened to him, and indeed exchanged at least a couple of words with him. Each of us reads the poem as an individual, but the poem itself constructs a reader who is not identical to any of us. We are so used to adopting ‘reading’ roles dictated by texts like this that often we don’t even notice the way in which the text has manipulated us.

Activity 14

Now read the Robert Browning poem again, this time asking yourself if the speaking voice changes in the last two stanzas, and if the person who is being addressed remains the same.

Discussion

If the first half of the poem is characterized by the repetition of “you” and the sense of an audience that pronoun creates, then the second half seems quite different in content and tone. The speaker is trying to find a parallel in his experience to make sense of and explain his feeling of awe; the change of tone is subtle. Whereas someone is undoubtedly being addressed directly in the first stanza, in the third and fourth, readers overhear – as if the speaker is talking to himself.

At first the connection between the man who met Shelley and the memory of finding an eagle’s feather may not be obvious, but there is a point of comparison. As stanza 2 explains, part of the speaker’s sense of wonder stems from the fact that time did not stand still: “you were living before that, / And also you are living after.” The moor in stanza 3, like the listener, is anonymous – it has “a name of its own … no doubt” – but where it is or what it is called is unimportant: only one “hand’s-breadth” is memorable, the spot that “shines alone” where the feather was found. The poem is about moments that stand out in our memories while the ordinary daily stuff of life fades. It also acknowledges that we don’t all value the
same things.

Activity 15

Take another look at the poem. How would you describe its form?

Discussion

The structure of the poem is perfectly balanced: of the four quatrains, two deal with each memory, so, although the nature of each seems quite different, implicitly the form invites us to compare them. Think about the way in which Browning introduces the eagle feather. How does he convince us that this is a rare find?

To begin with, the third and fourth stanzas make up one complete sentence, with a colon at the end of the third announcing the fourth; this helps to achieve a sense of building up to something important. Then we move from the visual image of a large space of moor to the very circumscribed place where the feather is found, but the reason why this “hand’s-breadth” shines out is delayed for the next two lines “For there I picked up on the heather” – yes? what? – “And there I put inside my breast” – well? – “A moulted feather,” ah (and notice the internal rhyme there of feather with heather, which draws attention to and emphasizes the harmony of the moment), and then the word feather is repeated and expanded: “an eagle-feather.” Clearly the feather of no other bird would do, for ultimately the comparison is of eagle to the poet; Browning knows Shelley through his poetry as he knows the eagle through its feather, and that feather presents a striking visual image.

FREE VERSE

Free verse refers to poetry that does not follow standard or regularized meter (the organization of stressed and unstressed syllables) or rhyme scheme. As opposed to more traditional poetry, which tends to use recurring line lengths, metrical patterns, and rhyme to unify individual lines of verse and tie them to other lines within the same poem, free verse can, at times, seem to be random, having no pattern or organization at all. Yet in the hands of many poets, free verse enables a different kind of organization, as they balance free verse’s openness, its ability to provide elements of the poem with a different amount of emphasis, with the use of repeated imagery or syntactic patterns (parallel organization of grammatical elements) to maintain coherence and create a sense of connection among lines.

Free verse does, at times, draw on metrical patterns and occasional rhyme to tie lines together. What distinguishes free verse from other traditional forms of verse is that it only uses these elements occasionally—for a few lines here and there in a longer poem—and does not use them to structure the poem as a whole. A poem in free verse, then, does not lack structure—or, in many cases, some instances of metrical organization or rhyme—it simply does not maintain or use a regular pattern of meter or rhyme to structure the poem as a whole. Instead, free verse relies more on thematic, syntactic, or semantic repetition and development to create coherence.
Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* is often credited as introducing free verse into English-language poetry. While not quite true (other experiments and uses preceded his), Whitman’s poetry helped to establish free verse’s potential for exploring a broad range of topics and its ability to embrace an extensive number of ways of organizing verse lines. Later-nineteenth century poets, such as Matthew Arnold in England, further explored the use of free verse, but it was the French symbolists (Jules Laforgue, Gustave Kahn, and Arthur Rimbaud) who practiced what they called vers libre most fully during this period. In the twentieth century, free verse came to dominate much poetic production in English, beginning with the modernists (such as T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams) who saw the open form as allowing for the more nimble representation of a modern fragmented and accelerated world.

**Glossary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alliteration</td>
<td>repetition of sounds, usually the first letters of successive words, or words that are close together. Alliteration usually applies only to consonants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapest</td>
<td>see under foot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assonance</td>
<td>repetition of identical or similar vowel sounds.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ballad</td>
<td>originally a song which tells a story, often involving dialogue. Characteristically, the storyteller’s own feelings are not expressed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caesura</td>
<td>strong pause in a line of verse, usually appearing in the middle of a line and marked with a comma, semi-colon, or a full stop.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couplet</td>
<td>pair of rhymed lines, often used as a way of rounding off a sonnet; hence the term ‘closing couplet’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dactyl</td>
<td>see under foot.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>spoken exchange between characters, usually in drama and fiction but also sometimes in poetry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diction</td>
<td>writer’s choice of words. Poetic diction might be described, for instance, as formal or informal, elevated or colloquial.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elegy</td>
<td>poem of loss, usually mourning the death of a public figure, or someone close to the poet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellipsis</td>
<td>omission of words from a sentence to achieve brevity and compression.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjambment</td>
<td>the use of run-on lines in poetry. Instead of stopping or pausing at the end of a line of poetry, we have to carry on reading until we complete the meaning in a later line. The term comes from the French for ‘striding’.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Epic
A long narrative poem dealing with events on a grand scale, often with a hero above average in qualities and exploits.

Epigram
Witty, condensed expression. The closing couplet in some of Shakespeare’s sonnets is often described as an epigram.

Foot
A unit of meter with a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. In the examples that follow, a stressed syllable is indicated by ‘/’, and an unstressed syllable by ‘x’: anapest: xx/; dactyl: /xx; iamb: x/; spondee: //; trochee: /x

Heroic couplet
Iambic pentameter lines rhyming in pairs, most commonly used for satiric or didactic poetry, and particularly favoured in the eighteenth century.

Iamb
See under foot.

Iambic pentameter
A line consisting of five iambs.

Imagery
Special use of language in a way that evokes sense impressions (usually visual).

Metaphor
Image in which one thing is substituted for another, or the quality of one object is identified with another. The sun, for Shakespeare, becomes ‘the eye of heaven’.

Meter
(reverse the order of normal speech in order to make the words fit a particular rhythm, or rhyme, or both.

Octave
A group of eight lines of poetry, often forming the first part of a sonnet.

Ode
A poem on a serious subject, usually written in an elevated formal style; often written to commemorate public events.

Onomatopoeia
A word that seems to imitate the sound or sounds associated with the object or action, for example, ‘cuckoo’.

Ottava rima
A poem in eight-line stanzas, rhyming a b a b a b c c.

Narrative
The telling of a series of events (either true or fictitious). The person relating these events is the narrator. However, it is often more usual in poetry to refer to ‘the speaker’.

Ode
A poem on a serious subject, usually written in an elevated formal style; often written to commemorate public events.

Quatrain
A group of four lines of poetry, usually rhymed.

Refrain
A line or phrase repeated throughout a poem, sometimes with variations, often at the end of each stanza.

Rhyme
Rhymes can be found, as in: ‘Sister, my sister, O fleet, sweet swallow’.
Survey of Native American Literature

Rhyme scheme pattern of rhymes established in a poem. The pattern of rhymes in a quatrain, for instance, might be ‘a b a b’ or ‘a b b a’.

Rhythm pattern of beats or stresses in a line creating a sense of movement. Sestet: group of six lines of poetry, often forming the second part of a sonnet.

Simile image in which one thing is likened to another. The similarity is usually pointed out with the word ‘like’ or ‘as’: ‘My love is like a red, red rose’.

Sonnet fourteen iambic pentameter lines with varying rhyme schemes. Spondee see under foot.

Syllable single unit of pronunciation. ‘Sun’ is one syllable; ‘sunshine’ is two syllables.

Tercet group of three lines in poetry, sometimes referred to as a triplet. Trochee: see under foot.

Turn distinctive movement of change in mood or thought or feeling. In the sonnet, the turn usually occurs between the octave and the sestet, though the closing couplet in Shakespeare’s sonnets often constitutes the turn.

Villanelle an intricate French verse form with some lines repeated, and only two rhyme sounds throughout the five three-line stanzas and the final four-line stanza.

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Poet Wendy Rose is known for her powerful discussions of identity. Read the poems at:

http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rose/online.htm

and then post about these in the discussion board. Remember to cite line numbers for poems and to separate the speaker from the poet. They aren’t necessarily the same… although they may be, as her poems show.
Wendy Rose: Just What's All This Fuss About Whiteshamanism, Anyway?

Wendy Rose’s essay offers a powerful indictment of “wannabe” writers attempting to coopt Native culture and personality.

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Billy Collins: A Poet Speaks Out

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This video features three poems from the former US Poet Laureate Billy Collins. Focus on “The Lanyard.”

As you listen to “The Lanyard,” click on the link below to follow along with the text of the poem. “The

- Lanyard” by Billy Collins, from The Writer’s Almanac

William James “Billy” Collins (born March 22, 1941) is an American poet, appointed as Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003. He is a Distinguished Professor at Lehman College of the City University of New York and is the Senior Distinguished Fellow of the Winter Park Institute, Florida. Collins was recognized as a Literary Lion of the New York Public Library (1992) and selected as the New York State Poet for 2004 through 2006. As of 2015, he is a teacher in the MFA program at Stony Brook Southampton.

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Free Verse

Free verse refers to poetry that does not follow standard or regularized meter (the organization of stressed and unstressed syllables) or rhyme scheme. As opposed to more traditional poetry, which tends to use recurring line lengths, metrical patterns, and rhyme to unify individual lines of verse and tie them to other lines within the same poem, free verse can, at times, seem to be random, having no pattern or organization at all. Yet in the hands of many poets, free verse enables a different kind of organization, as they balance free verse’s openness, its ability to provide elements of the poem with a different amount of emphasis, with the use of repeated imagery or syntactic patterns (parallel organization of grammatical elements) to maintain coherence and create a sense of connection among lines. Even as it eschews regular meter and rhyme schemes, free verse does, at times, draw on metrical patterns and occasional rhyme to tie lines together. What distinguishes free verse from other traditional forms of verse is that it only uses these elements occasionally—for a few lines here and there in a longer poem—and does not use them to structure the poem as a whole. A poem in free verse, then, does not lack structure—or, in many cases, some instances of metrical organization or rhyme—it simply does not maintain or use a regular pattern of meter or rhyme to structure the poem as a whole. Instead, free verse relies more on thematic, syntactic, or semantic repetition and development to create coherence.

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Stress

Stress Overview
Stresses allow poets to focus readers’ attention on the meaning of their poetry. We all know that poetry is different from everyday language. A lot of that sense of difference resides in the stresses good poets manipulate in order to create meaningful experiences for readers. I don’t expect you to start counting stresses. Most of the poetry we’ll read is not in formal meter; however, you should become attuned to the sound of the words.

- How does the poet choose to use stresses in a given line? For
- what purpose does this word get used?
- How does this sound?

These are all legitimate questions. I expect you to become aware (in a general way) of the way poets use sound for their purposes. You won’t get to these questions unless you reread the poems. Reading aloud helps, too!

If you get the idea that stresses are relative and that poets play with patterns, you’re in good shape. I also want you to see if the NA poets we read follow iambic patterns. Don’t expect them to rhyme—most contemporary poets couldn’t rhyme if you paid them. (Hah, most contemporary poets couldn’t get paid for their work, either, but that’s another story.)

Stressed Yet?
Okay: read aloud, reread, transitions. What else is there? Lots, actually! Take stresses, for example. In a heavily accented language like English, words have relative stresses. Here’s an example:”A man, a plan, a canal, Panama.” Not exactly poetry, but it reads the same backwards as it does forwards (it’s a palindrome). We can give this line stresses: put / in for a stressed syllable, and U above the syllable that’s not as stressed.

```
U / U / U U // U U
A man, a plan, a canal, Panama
```

Try an easier one, now:
The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.
Where would the stresses go?

U / U / U / U / U /
The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain. That’s right!

**Form and Content**
Now, you might disagree with my stresses here. It’s somewhat open to interpretation. Words have stress patterns (just look in any dictionary). If you wanted to give mainly two stresses in a row, you’d probably avoid stressing “on.” Here’s a major point about reading: **Change the form and you change the content**.

I don’t like using all caps, but that statement above is the big deal about poetry! Above, you changed the form (the stress pattern you saw), and that changed the content of the poem (its meaning). Form and content—it’s all about form and content. When you look for a change in meaning, you’ll probably also find a change in the form.

**Metric Feet? Huh? Are we in Canada?**
Poetry is all about patterns. The unstressed-stressed pattern here is very important. A foot is a measure of stressed. Usually, feet have two syllables (though some have three).
An iamb is a pattern of unstressed stressed syllables. Is the second example iambic? (If you said “yes,” you’re right.)
A trochee is a foot where the first syllable is stressed and the second is unstressed. Poetry would be pretty boring if poets didn’t vary the pattern. Just like in soccer or hockey, where players make certain moves, poets have moves.
The second example has how many feet? (5) The second example has _syllables? (10)

It’s **iambic pentameter**. Its overall pattern is iambic, and has five feet of two syllables each.

**Questions**
Why would five-foot lines be a good choice in poetry? What do ten-syllable (five-foot) lines allow poets to do?
Why would two-foot lines or ten-foot lines have major drawbacks?

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Zitkala-Sa, "The School Days of an Indian Girl," 1900

1. THE LAND OF RED APPLES.

There were eight in our party of bronzed children who were going East with the missionaries. Among us were three young braves, two tall girls, and we three little ones, Judéwin, Thowin, and I.

We had been very impatient to start on our journey to the Red Apple Country, which, we were told, lay a little beyond the great circular horizon of the Western prairie. Under a sky of rosy apples we dreamt of roaming as freely and happily as we had chased the cloud shadows on the Dakota plains. We had anticipated much pleasure from a ride on the iron horse, but the throngs of staring palefaces disturbed and troubled us.

On the train, fair women, with tottering babies on each arm, stopped their haste and scrutinized the children of absent mothers. Large men, with heavy bundles in their hands, halted near by, and riveted their glassy blue eyes upon us.

I sank deep into the corner of my seat, for I resented being watched. Directly in front of me, children who were no larger than I hung themselves upon the backs of their seats, with their bold white faces toward me. Sometimes they took their forefingers out of their mouths and pointed at my moccasined feet. Their mothers, instead of reproving such rude curiosity, looked closely at me, and attracted their children’s further notice to my blanket. This embarrassed me, and kept me constantly on the verge of tears.

I sat perfectly still, with my eyes downcast, daring only now and then to shoot long glances around me. Chancing to turn to the window at my side, I was quite breathless upon seeing one familiar object. It was the telegraph pole which strode by at short paces. Very near my mother’s dwelling, along the edge of a road thickly bordered with wild sunflowers, some poles like these had been planted by white men. Often I had stopped, on my way down the road, to hold my ear against the pole, and, hearing its low moaning, I used to wonder what the paleface had done to hurt it. Now I sat watching for each pole that glided by to be the last one.

In this way I had forgotten my uncomfortable surroundings, when I heard one of my comrades call out my name. I saw the missionary standing very near, tossing candies and gums into our midst. This amused us all, and we tried to see who could catch the most of the sweetmeats.

Though we rode several days inside of the iron horse, I do not recall a single thing about our luncheons.

It was night when we reached the school grounds. The lights from the windows of the large buildings fell upon some of the icicled trees that stood beneath them. We were led toward an open door, where the brightness of the lights within flooded out over the heads of the excited palefaces who blocked our way. My body trembled more from fear than from the snow I trod upon.

Entering the house, I stood close against the wall. The strong glaring light in the large whitewashed room dazzled my eyes. The noisy hurrying of hard shoes upon a bare wooden floor increased the
whirring in my ears. My only safety seemed to be in keeping next to the wall. As I was wondering in which
direction to escape from all this confusion, two warm hands grasped me firmly, and in the same moment I was tossed
high in midair. A rosy-cheeked paleface woman caught me in her arms. I was both frightened and insulted by such
trifling. I stared into her eyes, wishing her to let me stand on my own feet, but she jumped me up and down with
increasing enthusiasm. My mother had never made a plaything of her wee daughter. Remembering this I began to
cry aloud.

They misunderstood the cause of my tears, and placed me at a white table loaded with food. There our party were united
again. As I did not hush my crying, one of the older ones whispered to me, “Wait until you are alone in the night.”

It was very little I could swallow besides my sobs, that evening.

“Oh, I want my mother and my brother Dawée! I want to go to my aunt!” I pleaded; but the ears of the palefaces could
not hear me.

From the table we were taken along an upward incline of wooden boxes, which I learned afterward to call a stairway.
At the top was a quiet hall, dimly lighted. Many narrow beds were in one straight line down the entire length of the
wall. In them lay sleeping brown faces, which peeped just out of the coverings. I was tucked into bed with one of
the tall girls, because she talked to me in my mother tongue and seemed to soothe me.

I had arrived in the wonderful land of rosy skies, but I was not happy, as I had thought I should be. My long travel
and the bewildering sights had exhausted me. I fell asleep, heaving deep, tired sobs. My tears were left to dry
themselves in streaks, because neither my aunt nor my mother was near to wipe them away.

II. THE CUTTING OF MY LONG HAIR.

The first day in the land of apples was a bitter-cold one; for the snow still covered the ground, and the trees were bare.
A large bell rang for breakfast, its loud metallic voice crashing through the belfry overhead and into our sensitive
ears. The annoying clatter of shoes on bare floors gave us no peace. The constant clash of harsh noises, with an
undercurrent of many voices murmuring an unknown tongue, made a bedlam within which I was securely tied.
And though my spirit tore itself in struggling for its lost freedom, all was useless.

A paleface woman, with white hair, came up after us. We were placed in a line of girls who were marching into the
dining room. These were Indian girls, in stiff shoes and closely clinging dresses. The small girls wore sleeved aprons
and shingled hair. As I walked noiselessly in my soft moccasins, I felt like sinking to the floor, for my blanket had
been stripped from my shoulders. I looked hard at the Indian girls, who seemed not to care that they were even more
immodestly dressed than I, in their tightly fitting clothes. While we marched in, the boys entered at an opposite door. I
watched for the three young braves who came in our party. I spied them in the rear ranks, looking as uncomfortable as
I felt. A small bell was tapped, and each of the pupils drew a chair from under the table. Supposing this act meant they
were to be seated, I pulled out mine and at once slipped into it from one side. But when I turned my head, I saw that I
was the only one seated, and all the rest at our table remained standing.
Just as I began to rise, looking shyly around to see how chairs were to be used, a second bell was sounded. All were
seated at last, and I had to crawl back into my chair again. I heard a man’s voice at
one end of the hall, and I looked around to see him. But all the others hung their heads over their plates. As I glanced at the long chain of tables, I caught the eyes of a paleface woman upon me. Immediately I dropped my eyes, wondering why I was so keenly watched by the strange woman. The man ceased his mutterings, and then a third bell was tapped. Every one picked up his knife and fork and began eating. I began crying instead, for by this time I was afraid to venture anything more.

But this eating by formula was not the hardest trial in that first day. Late in the morning, my friend Judéwin gave me a terrible warning. Judéwin knew a few words of English; and she had overheard the paleface woman talk about cutting our long, heavy hair. Our mothers had taught us that only unskilled warriors who were captured had their hair shingled by the enemy. Among our people, short hair was worn by mourners, and shingled hair by cowards!

We discussed our fate some moments, and when Judéwin said, “We have to submit, because they are strong,” I rebelled.

“No, I will not submit! I will struggle first!” I answered.

I watched my chance, and when no one noticed, I disappeared. I crept up the stairs as quietly as I could in my squeaking shoes,—my moccasins had been exchanged for shoes. Along the hall I passed, without knowing whither I was going. Turning aside to an open door, I found a large room with three white beds in it. The windows were covered with dark green curtains, which made the room very dim. Thankful that no one was there, I directed my steps toward the corner farthest from the door. On my hands and knees I crawled under the bed, and cuddled myself in the dark corner.

From my hiding place I peered out, shuddering with fear whenever I heard footsteps near by. Though in the hall loud voices were calling my name, and I knew that even Judéwin was searching for me, I did not open my mouth to answer. Then the steps were quickened and the voices became excited. The sounds came nearer and nearer. Women and girls entered the room. I held my breath and watched them open closet doors and peep behind large trunks. Some one threw up the curtains, and the room was filled with sudden light. What caused them to stoop and look under the bed I do not know. I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair.

I cried aloud, shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids. Then I lost my spirit. Since the day I was taken from my mother I had suffered extreme indignities. People had stared at me. I had been tossed about in the air like a wooden puppet. And now my long hair was shingled like a coward’s! In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do; for now I was only one of many little animals driven by a herder.

III. THE SNOW EPISODE.

A short time after our arrival we three Dakotas were playing in the snowdrift. We were all still deaf to the English language, excepting Judéwin, who always heard such puzzling things. One morning we learned through her ears that we were forbidden to fall lengthwise in the snow, as we had been doing, to see our own impressions. However, before many hours we had forgotten the order, and were having great sport in the snow, when a shrill voice called us. Looking up, we saw an imperative hand beckoning us into the house. We shook the snow off ourselves, and started toward the woman as slowly as we
Judéwin said: “Now the paleface is angry with us. She is going to punish us for falling into the snow. If she looks straight into your eyes and talks loudly, you must wait until she stops. Then, after a tiny pause, say, ‘No.’” The rest of the way we practiced upon the little word “no.”

As it happened, Thowin was summoned to judgment first. The door shut behind her with a click.

Judéwin and I stood silently listening at the keyhole. The paleface woman talked in very severe tones. Her words fell from her lips like crackling embers, and her inflection ran up like the small end of a switch. I understood her voice better than the things she was saying. I was certain we had made her very impatient with us. Judéwin heard enough of the words to realize all too late that she had taught us the wrong reply.

“Oh, poor Thowin!” she gasped, as she put both hands over her ears. Just then I heard Thowin’s tremulous answer, “No.”

With an angry exclamation, the woman gave her a hard spanking. Then she stopped to say something. Judéwin said it was this: “Are you going to obey my word the next time?”

Thowin answered again with the only word at her command, “No.”

This time the woman meant her blows to smart, for the poor frightened girl shrieked at the top of her voice. In the midst of the whipping the blows ceased abruptly, and the woman asked another question: “Are you going to fall in the snow again?”

Thowin gave her bad password another trial. We heard her say feebly, “No! No!”

With this the woman hid away her half-worn slipper, and led the child out, stroking her black shorn head. Perhaps it occurred to her that brute force is not the solution for such a problem. She did nothing to Judéwin nor to me. She only returned to us our unhappy comrade, and left us alone in the room.

During the first two or three seasons misunderstandings as ridiculous as this one of the snow episode frequently took place, bringing unjustifiable frights and punishments into our little lives.

Within a year I was able to express myself somewhat in broken English. As soon as I comprehended a part of what was said and done, a mischievous spirit of revenge possessed me. One day I was called in from my play for some misconduct. I had disregarded a rule which seemed to me very needlessly binding. I was sent into the kitchen to mash the turnips for dinner. It was noon, and steaming dishes were hastily carried into the dining-room. I hated turnips, and their odor which came from the brown jar was offensive to me. With fire in my heart, I took the wooden tool that the paleface woman held out to me. I stood upon a step, and, grasping the handle with both hands, I bent in hot rage over the turnips. I worked my vengeance upon them. All were so busily occupied that no one noticed me. I saw that the turnips were in a pulp, and that further beating could not improve them; but the order was, “Mash these turnips,” and mash them I would! I renewed my energy; and as I sent the masher into the bottom of the jar, I felt a satisfying sensation that the weight of my body had gone into it.

Just here a paleface woman came up to my table. As she looked into the jar, she shoved my hands
roughly aside. I stood fearless and angry. She placed her red hands upon the rim of the jar. Then she gave one lift and stride away from the table. But lo! the pulpy contents fell through the crumbled bottom to the floor I She spared me no scolding phrases that I had earned. I did not heed them. I felt triumphant in my revenge, though deep within me I was a wee bit sorry to have broken the jar.

As I sat eating my dinner, and saw that no turnips were served, I whooped in my heart for having once asserted the rebellion within me.

IV. THE DEVIL.

Among the legends the old warriors used to tell me were many stories of evil spirits. But I was taught to fear them no more than those who stalked about in material guise. I never knew there was an insolent chieftain among the bad spirits, who dared to array his forces against the Great Spirit, until I heard this white man’s legend from a paleface woman.

Out of a large book she showed me a picture of the white man’s devil. I looked in horror upon the strong claws that grew out of his fur-covered fingers. His feet were like his hands. Trailng at his heels was a scaly tail tipped with a serpent’s open jaws. His face was a patchwork: he had bearded cheeks, like some I had seen palefaces wear; his nose was an eagle’s bill, and his sharp-pointed ears were pricked up like those of a sly fox. Above them a pair of cow’s horns curved upward. I trembled with awe, and my heart throbbed in my throat, as I looked at the king of evil spirits. Then I heard the paleface woman say that this terrible creature roamed loose in the world, and that little girls who disobeyed school regulations were to be tortured by him.

That night I dreamt about this evil divinity. Once again I seemed to be in my mother’s cottage. An Indian woman had come to visit my mother. On opposite sides of the kitchen stove, which stood in the center of the small house, my mother and her guest were seated in straight-backed chairs. I played with a train of empty spools hitched together on a string. It was night, and the wick burned feebly. Suddenly I heard some one turn our door-knob from without.

My mother and the woman hushed their talk, and both looked toward the door. It opened gradually. I waited behind the stove. The hinges squeaked as the door was slowly, very slowly pushed inward.

Then in rushed the devil! He was tall! He looked exactly like the picture I had seen of him in the white man’s papers. He did not speak to my mother, because he did not know the Indian language, but his glittering yellow eyes were fastened upon me. He took long strides around the stove, passing behind the woman’s chair. I threw down my spools, and ran to my mother. He did not fear her, but followed closely after me. Then I ran round and round the stove, crying aloud for help. But my mother and the woman seemed not to know my danger. They sat still, looking quietly upon the devil’s chase after me. At last I grew dizzy. My head revolved as on a hidden pivot. My knees became numb, and doubled under my weight like a pair of knife blades without a spring. Beside my mother’s chair I fell in a heap. Just as the devil stooped over me with outstretched claws my mother awoke from her quiet indifference, and lifted me on her lap. Whereupon the devil vanished, and I was awake.

On the following morning I took my revenge upon the devil. Stealing into the room where a wall of shelves was filled with books, I drew forth The Stories of the Bible. With a broken slate pencil I carried in my apron pocket, I began by scratching out his wicked eyes. A few moments later, when I was ready to leave the room, there was a ragged hole in the page where the picture of the devil had once been.
V. IRON ROUTINE

A loud-clamoring bell awakened us at half-past six in the cold winter mornings. From happy dreams of Western rolling lands and unlassoed freedom we tumbled out upon chilly bare floors back again into a paleface day. We had short time to jump into our shoes and clothes, and wet our eyes with icy water, before a small hand bell was vigorously rung for roll call.

There were too many drowsy children and too numerous orders for the day to waste a moment in any apology to nature for giving her children such a shock in the early morning. We rushed downstairs, bounding over two high steps at a time, to land in the assembly room.

A paleface woman, with a yellow-covered roll book open on her arm and a gnawed pencil in her hand, appeared at the door. Her small, tired face was coldly lighted with a pair of large gray eyes. Having glanced at her long list of names and called out the first one, she tossed up her chin and peered through the crystals of her spectacles to make sure of the answer “Here.”

Relentlessly her pencil black-marked our daily records if we were not present to respond to our names, and no chum of ours had done it successfully for us. No matter if a dull headache or the painful cough of slow consumption had delayed the absentee, there was only time enough to mark the tardiness. It was next to impossible to leave the iron routine after the civilizing machine had once begun its day’s buzzing; and as it was inbred in me to suffer in silence rather than to appeal to the ears of one whose open eyes could not see my pain, I have many times trudged in the day’s harness heavy-footed, like a dumb sick brute.

Once I lost a dear classmate. I remember well how she used to mope along at my side, until one morning she could not raise her head from her pillow. At her deathbed I stood weeping, as the paleface woman sat near her moistening the dry lips. Among the folds of the bedclothes I saw the open pages of the white man’s Bible. The dying Indian girl talked disconnectedly of Jesus the Christ and the paleface who was cooling her swollen hands and feet.

I grew bitter, and censured the woman for cruel neglect of our physical ills. I despised the pencils that moved automatically, and the one teaspoon which dealt out, from a large bottle, healing to a row of variously ailing Indian children. I blamed the hard-working, well-meaning, ignorant woman who was inculcating in our hearts her superstitious ideas. Though I was sullen in all my little troubles, as soon as I felt better I was ready again to smile upon the cruel woman. Within a week I was again actively testing the chains which tightly bound my individuality like a mummy for burial.

The melancholy of those black days has left so long a shadow that it darkens the path of years that have since gone by. These sad memories rise above those of smoothly grinding school days. Perhaps my Indian nature is the moaning wind which stirs them now for their present record. But, however tempestuous this is within me, it comes out as the low voice of a curiously colored seashell, which is only for those ears that are bent with compassion to hear it.

VI. FOUR STRANGE SUMMERS.

After my first three years of school, I roamed again in the Western country through four strange
During this time I seemed to hang in the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid. My brother, being almost ten years my senior, did not quite understand my feelings. My mother had never gone inside of a schoolhouse, and so she was not capable of comforting her daughter who could read and write. Even nature seemed to have no place for me. I was neither a wee girl nor a tall one; neither a wild Indian nor a tame one. This deplorable situation was the effect of my brief course in the East, and the unsatisfactory “teenth” in a girl’s years.

It was under these trying conditions that, one bright afternoon, as I sat restless and unhappy in my mother’s cabin, I caught the sound of the spirited step of my brother’s pony on the road which passed by our dwelling. Soon I heard the wheels of a light buckboard, and Dawée’s familiar “Ho!” to his pony. He alighted upon the bare ground in front of our house. Tying his pony to one of the projecting corner logs of the low-roofed cottage, he stepped upon the wooden doorstep.

I met him there with a hurried greeting, and, as I passed by, he looked a quiet “What?” into my eyes.

When he began talking with my mother, I slipped the rope from the pony’s bridle. Seizing the reins and bracing my feet against the dashboard, I wheeled around in an instant. The pony was ever ready to try his speed. Looking backward, I saw Dawée waving his hand to me. I turned with the curve in the road and disappeared. I followed the winding road which crawled upward between the bases of little hillocks. Deep water-worn ditches ran parallel on either side. A strong wind blew against my cheeks and fluttered my sleeves. The pony reached the top of the highest hill, and began an even race on the level lands. There was nothing moving within that great circular horizon of the Dakota prairies save the tall grasses, over which the wind blew and rolled off in long, shadowy waves.

Within this vast wigwam of blue and green I rode reckless and insignificant. It satisfied my small consciousness to see the white foam fly from the pony’s mouth.

Suddenly, out of the earth a coyote came forth at a swinging trot that was taking the cunning thief toward the hills and the village beyond. Upon the moment’s impulse, I gave him a long chase and a wholesome fright. As I turned away to go back to the village, the wolf sank down upon his haunches for rest, for it was a hot summer day; and as I drove slowly homeward, I saw his sharp nose still pointed at me, until I vanished below the margin of the hilltops.

In a little while I came in sight of my mother’s house. Dawée stood in the yard, laughing at an old warrior who was pointing his forefinger, and again waving his whole hand, toward the hills. With his blanket drawn over one shoulder, he talked and motioned excitedly. Dawée turned the old man by the shoulder and pointed me out to him.

“Oh, han!” (Oh, yes) the warrior muttered, and went his way. He had climbed the top of his favorite barren hill to survey the surrounding prairies, when he spied my chase after the coyote. His keen eyes recognized the pony and driver. At once uneasy for my safety, he had come running to my mother’s cabin to give her warning. I did not appreciate his kindly interest, for there was an unrest gnawing at my heart.

As soon as he went away, I asked Dawée about something else.

“No, my baby sister, I cannot take you with me to the party tonight,” he replied. Though I was not far
from fifteen, and I felt that before long I should enjoy all the privileges of my tall cousin, Dawée persisted in calling me his babysister.

That moonlight night, I cried in my mother’s presence when I heard the jolly young people pass by our cottage. They were no more young braves in blankets and eagle plumes, nor Indian maids with prettily painted cheeks. They had gone three years to school in the East, and had become civilized. The young men wore the white man’s coat and trousers, with bright neckties. The girls wore tight muslin dresses, with ribbons at neck and waist. At these gatherings they talked English. I could speak English almost as well as my brother, but I was not properly dressed to be taken along. I had no hat, no ribbons, and no close-fitting gown. Since my return from school I had thrown away my shoes, and wore again the soft moccasins.

While Dawée was busily preparing to go I controlled my tears. But when I heard him bounding away on his pony, I buried my face in my arms and cried hot tears.

My mother was troubled by my unhappiness. Coming to my side, she offered me the only printed matter we had in our home. It was an Indian Bible, given her some years ago by a missionary. She tried to console me. “Here, my child, are the white man’s papers. Read a little from them,” she said most piously.

I took it from her hand, for her sake; but my enraged spirit felt more like burning the book, which afforded me no help, and was a perfect delusion to my mother. I did not read it, but laid it unopened on the floor, where I sat on my feet. The dim yellow light of the braided muslin burning in a small vessel of oil flickered and sizzled in the awful silent storm which followed my rejection of the Bible.

Now my wrath against the fates consumed my tears before they reached my eyes. I sat stony, with a bowed head. My mother threw a shawl over her head and shoulders, and stepped out into the night.

After an uncertain solitude, I was suddenly aroused by a loud cry piercing the night. It was my mother’s voice wailing among the barren hills which held the bones of buried warriors. She called aloud for her brothers’ spirits to support her in her helpless misery. My fingers Grey icy cold, as I realized that my unrestrained tears had betrayed my suffering to her, and she was grieving for me.

Before she returned, though I knew she was on her way, for she had ceased her weeping, I extinguished the light, and leaned my head on the window sill.

Many schemes of running away from my surroundings hovered about in my mind. A few more moons of such a turmoil drove me away to the eastern school. I rode on the white man’s iron steed, thinking it would bring me back to my mother in a few winters, when I should be grown tall, and there would be congenial friends awaiting me.

VII. INCURRING MY MOTHER’S DISPLEASURE.

In the second journey to the East I had not come without some precautions. I had a secret interview with one of our best medicine men, and when I left his wigwam I carried securely in my sleeve a tiny bunch of magic roots. This possession assured me of friends wherever I should go. So absolutely did I believe in its charms that I wore it through all the school routine for more than a year. Then, before I lost my faith in the dead roots, I lost the little buckskin bag containing all my good luck.
At the close of this second term of three years I was the proud owner of my first diploma. The following autumn I ventured upon a college career against my mother’s will.

I had written for her approval, but in her reply I found no encouragement. She called my notice to her neighbors’ children, who had completed their education in three years. They had returned to their homes, and were then talking English with the frontier settlers. Her few words hinted that I had better give up my slow attempt to learn the white man’s ways, and be content to roam over the prairies and find my living upon wild roots. I silenced her by deliberate disobedience.

Thus, homeless and heavy-hearted, I began anew my life among strangers.

As I hid myself in my little room in the college dormitory, away from the scornful and yet curious eyes of the students, I pined for sympathy. Often I wept in secret, wishing I had gone West, to be nourished by my mother’s love, instead of remaining among a cold race whose hearts were frozen hard with prejudice.

During the fall and winter seasons I scarcely had a real friend, though by that time several of my classmates were courteous to me at a safe distance.

My mother had not yet forgiven my rudeness to her, and I had no moment for letter-writing. By daylight and lamplight, I spun with reeds and thistles, until my hands were tired from their weaving, the magic design which promised me the white man’s respect.

At length, in the spring term, I entered an oratorical contest among the various classes. As the day of competition approached, it did not seem possible that the event was so near at hand, but it came. In the chapel the classes assembled together, with their invited guests. The high platform was carpeted, and gaily festooned with college colors. A bright white light illumined the room, and outlined clearly the great polished beams that arched the domed ceiling. The assembled crowds filled the air with pulsating murmurs. When the hour for speaking arrived all were hushed. But on the wall the old clock which pointed out the trying moment ticked calmly on.

One after another I saw and heard the orators. Still, I could not realize that they longed for the favorable decision of the judges as much as I did. Each contestant received a loud burst of applause, and some were cheered heartily. Too soon my turn came, and I paused a moment behind the curtains for a deep breath. After my concluding words, I heard the same applause that the others had called out.

Upon my retreating steps, I was astounded to receive from my fellow-students a large bouquet of roses tied with flowing ribbons. With the lovely flowers I fled from the stage. This friendly token was a rebuke to me for the hard feelings I had borne them.

Later, the decision of the judges awarded me the first place. Then there was a mad uproar in the hall, where my classmates sang and shouted my name at the top of their lungs; and the disappointed students howled and brayed in fearfully dissonant tin trumpets. In this excitement, happy students rushed forward to offer their congratulations. And I could not conceal a smile when they wished to escort me in a procession to the students’ parlor, where all were going to calm themselves. Thanking them for the kind spirit which prompted them to make such a proposition, I walked alone with the night to my own little room.

A few weeks afterward, I appeared as the college representative in another contest. This time the
competition was among orators from different colleges in our State. It was held at the State capital, in one of the largest opera houses.

Here again was a strong prejudice against my people. In the evening, as the great audience filled the house, the student bodies began warring among themselves. Fortunately, I was spared witnessing any of the noisy wrangling before the contest began. The slurs against the Indian that stained the lips of our opponents were already burning like a dry fever within my breast.

But after the orations were delivered a deeper burn awaited me. There, before that vast ocean of eyes, some college rowdies threw out a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it. Under this they had printed in bold black letters words that ridiculed the college which was represented by a “squaw.” Such worse than barbarian rudeness embittered me.

Then anxiously we watched the man carry toward the stage the envelope containing the final decision. There were two prizes given, that night, and one of them was mine!

The evil spirit laughed within me when the white flag dropped out of sight, and the hands which hurled it hung limp in defeat.

Leaving the crowd as quickly as possible, I was soon in my room. The rest of the night I sat in an armchair and gazed into the crackling fire. I laughed no more in triumph when thus alone. The little taste of victory did not satisfy a hunger in my heart. In my mind I saw my mother far away on the Western plains, and she was holding a charge against me.

Zitkala-Ša (1876–1938) (Dakota: pronounced zitkála-ša, which translates to “Red Bird”), also known by the missionary-given name Gertrude Simmons Bonnin, was a Sioux (Yankton Dakota) writer, editor, musician, teacher and political activist. She wrote several works chronicling her youthful struggles with identity and pulls between the majority culture and her Native American heritage. Her later books in English were among the first works to bring traditional Native American stories to a widespread white readership.

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Momaday and His Invitation

I think that Momaday’s essays are fine examples of how Native American literature tends to work: it is inviting, and encompasses a lot of area. It defies easy definition. Momaday’s essay reflects his dynamic interpretation of life. Time and place and family meld in new ways for Western readers.

He Invites Us to Respond. . . So What Are We Waiting For?

Writing critically is a process of noting particulars. The author creates a design so that you’ll notice what they intend—but we all notice things beyond what the author wants, or different from what the author intends. Sometimes we fail to note things. (That issue of intention is sticky.)

See where you can interact with the text enough so that passages you like or passages which you question get put out there in a posting for others to see. Collectively, we’ll surprise one another with what we discuss.

Let’s see what people think about this arrowmaker story. It resists anyone who thinks they’ll exhaust its meaning, doesn’t it? I mean, isn’t Momaday’s interpretation of it only one of many possible takes on its meaning? I don’t mean to say that everything is relative, because of course we do have the need to prove our opinions. It is inviting to “weigh in” with your own comments, though, isn’t it?

Here is a partial list of questions I thought of to follow up on this essay. Put things together in a paragraphed response. At first glance, they may be less satisfying than an supplied answer, but everyone can piece this material together.

What does the story mean?

- What does Momaday say he intends this story to mean?
- How does the passage on the Wichita Mountains function in the essay?
- Were you surprised by Momaday’s use of the meteor shower? What does it reveal about the Kiowa? Do you have similar things which have lasted from your family or community?
- What sort of interpretation does the author provide? (You can take his or leave it, but we should identify it first.)
- How does the arrowmaker’s story relate to the early Ko-sahn example? Is one more important than the other. Do they work together in any way?
- Is the opening example of the meteor/comet shower and its importance related in any way to the arrowmaker’s story?

From these early connecting questions and function/purpose questions I usually develop outwards to some more particular questions.

Sometimes, though, it’s good to stick to the literary realm. For example, you might look at the symbolic associations of the plot of that story. You might look at metaphorical aspects—are there any identifications on that deep metaphorical level? If so, what are they?
In general, when reading you must keep asking questions. Ask them persistently. If stuck, it’s always necessary to go to the text and look at particulars. Otherwise, we’ll wallow in abstract concepts without ever seeing them played out. Show those particulars, and we’ll see where we can take them!

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Leslie Marmon Silko: Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective

Read this foundational essay, Leslie Marmon Silko’s “Language and Literature from a Pueblo Perspective.” It is available at:

www.unm.edu/~joglesby/Silko%20Essay.pdf

In many ways this essay is a statement of the terms of difference. The identity Silko claims for her people is rigorously and memorably defined here. This makes writing the definition empowering for Silko and her people. For us, the essay can be powerful as a trail: we don’t know where it leads, but we can appreciate the landscape. It challenges us to do something with these differences. Silko tells us of language uses that are outside our experience, but which are a daily part of Pueblo experience.

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N Scott Momaday: The Way to Rainy Mountain


Attend close to ways that the speaker combines place, time and identity—even down to the paragraph and sentence level. Momaday is like a few other writers (Emerson, for instance): If you can understand the workings of his typical sentence, you’ll see how it relates to the content points he’s making, those themes about the land speaking through the people. It’s powerful stuff and we also see it in the course with the Joy Harjo poetry collection.
About the Author

OER books are usually blends of different texts, so I cannot speak to the original Lumen authors’ backgrounds.

Here is a little bit of background about myself, though (written in that third person that is always a warning sign for individuals, as *Seinfeld* episodes show us).

Josh Dickinson is an Associate Professor of English at Jefferson Community College in Watertown, NY. He teaches English and Education courses with a focus upon American Literature 1 and 2, mythology, science fiction and fantasy, Native American Literature, and non-Western Literature.

Josh attended SUNY Jefferson and earned degrees from SUNY Potsdam (BA in English, 1993), Syracuse University (MA in English, 1995), and Colgate University (MAT in Secondary English Education, 1998).

Josh also supervises Jefferson’s EDGE (concurrent enrollment) English offerings at fifteen local high school and BOCES sites.

He enjoys participating in the National Novel Writing Month contest, having completed seven novels so far each November.

Josh has officiated high school soccer matches for 25 years and supports pro teams Tottenham Hotspur, FC Barcelona, and Borussia Dortmund.

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At the Canadian Museum of History, Ottawa: Go Habs, Go! CC

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